

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA

The Tale of a Feud

Domination, Resistance, and Agency in Highland Yemen



Marieke Brandt

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The Tale of a Feud

Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia

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The Tale of a Feud

*Domination,
Resistance, and Agency in
Highland Yemen*

By

Marieke Brandt



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حفظ الله اليمن وأهلها



ما تقبل الباطل ولا تتحمله	أحنا رجال الحرب ما فينا مزاح
أكيد ما يعرف حروف البسملة	ذي ما عرف قدر الدماء ذي تستباح
لا بد ما يندم على ما يفعله	أقسم برب الكون ذي أجرى الرياح
نبقى علي مبدا لأخر مرحله	الله عطانا الصبر مفتاح النجاح
نجاوب الداعي ولا نتجاهله	أذا دعانا للنداء داعي الفلاح
والموت لو جانا نقوم نستقبله	نعانق اخشام الخناجر والرماح
ما همنا سود المنيا المقبله	صدورنا للحرب تلقاها فساح
لكن معانا ما تضيع القبيله	صحيح ان العصر عصر الانفتاح
واحنا معاهما ما تقوله نفعله	تبقى معانا شايخه روس الضياع
وبأرضها بانال اعلى منزله	في جوها باكون مرفوع الجناح

...

We are men of war, we do not jest
 we do not accept nor endure injustice
 Who does not know how much blood has been shed
 does not know the Basmalah letters either
 And I swear by the Lord of the world who lets the wind blow
 that he does not regret what he has done
 God gave us patience as the key to success
 and we remain true to our principles to the end
 When the caller to success [God] calls us
 we respond and do not shirk
 We take up our daggers and spears
 and accept death when it comes to us
 We stand ready for war
 and do not care for death that may come
 Yes, we live in the age of openness
 but we will not let the tribe perish
 We will preserve its proud pre-eminence
 and we do what it commands
 I spread my wings in its air
 and on its land I attain supreme rank.
Zāmil (tribal chant) from Sufyān

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Notes on Transliteration

For transcribing Arabic, I follow the system of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) for both written and spoken words. Common words that are now found in English dictionaries, such as shaykh, imam, Quran, al-Qaeda, are rendered in their Anglicized forms, with Anglicized plurals (“s”). Common place names (Yemen, Sanaa, Aden, etc.) are Anglicized, while less familiar place names are transliterated. The Arabic *bin* or *ibn* (“son of”), appears as b. when it falls between two names, with some exceptions (when Ibn and Bin do not refer to “son of” but eponymous ancestors). All dates are common era (CE). Pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*).

Glossary

abū, pl. *ābā'* father

abyaḍ white

ʿaduww, pl. *aʿdā'* enemy

ʿAfāsh family name of ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh Ṣāliḥ, used in a derogatory fashion

Afāfīsh derogatory term for loyalists of ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh Ṣāliḥ

ʾahd bond, covenant

ahl al-bayt descendants of the Prophet

akh, pl. *ikhwa*, *ikhwān* brother

āl people of, descendants of

ʾālim, pl. *ulamā'* learned man, scholar of religious sciences

ʾAmāliqa "Giant's" Brigade

ʾāmil, pl. *ummāl* agent

amn security

ʾāqil, pl. *ʾuqqāl* (tribal) headman

ʾaṣabiyya partisanship

asad lion

aswad black

ʾayb, pl. *ʾuyūb* disgrace

ʾayn, pl. *aʾyān* (tribal) elder

bayt, pl. *buyūt* house, family, clan

birka cistern

bunduq, pl. *banādīq* rifle

ḍabṭ control

ḍāmīn, pl. *ḍumanā'* guarantor

dawshān tribal herald

dhū, pl. *adhwā'* descendants of

dhurra sorghum

ḍiʿya compensation for homicide, blood money

dīwān reception room, business room

fakhd, pl. *fukhūd* tribal segment

Firqa military division, abbreviation for al-Firqa al-Awlā Madarra^c (First Armoured Division)

ghadr betrayal

ghazwa, pl. *maghāzī* raid

ḥarb, pl. *ḥurūb* conflict on larger scale, war

ḥarb al-Manāṭiq al-Wuṣṭā War of the Central Areas

ḥarīm women, women's place

- hijra*, pl. *hijar* protected enclave, place under special tribal protection
ḥilf alliance
ḥirāba highway banditry
ibn, pl. *abnāʾ*, *banū* son
Ikhwān Muslimūn Muslim Brothers
ikhwanjī derogatory term for Muslim Brother
ʿilb, pl. *ʿulūb* *Ziziphus spina-christi*, Christ's Thorn, Jujube tree
infiṣāl secession
iqtilāʿ uprooting, punishment in tribal law
jabal, pl. *jibāl* hill, mountain
jāh honour
jidd, pl. *ajdād* grandfather, ancestor
katiba battalion
kayf euphoric state of mind induced by drug use, e.g., chewing *qāt*
khiyāna treachery
madhhab school of law, doctrine
madīna, pl. *mudun* town, city
maghrib west, sunset, evening prayer
majlis room receiving and entertaining guests
mashīkh shaykhship
mawāṭin citizen
mawāṭina citizenship
mīzān balance
muʿāriḍa opposition, resistance
muṣāhira marriage relation
musāwā parity
mustashār, pl. *mustashārīn* counsellor
naḡīr general call to war
qabīla, pl. *qabāʾil*, *qubul* tribe
qabīlī, pl. *qabāʾil* tribesperson
qabyala "tribalness"
qāḍī, pl. *quḍāʾ* jurist-administrator, judge in Islamic law
Qaḥṭān progenitor of the South Arabian tribes
qāt *Catha edulis forsskal*, plant with mildly stimulant leaves
qatl homicide, killing
qawm actively supportive group of men composed of different tribal segments.
Translated by Eduard Glaser as "Kriegsvolk" (warriors), "Heer" (troops)¹
qishla fort
rahīna, pl. *rahāʾin* hostage

¹ Cf. Dostal 1993: 52.

- sayṭara* domination, predominance
sayyid, pl. *sayyids* or *sāda* male descendant of the Prophet
shahāma chivalry
sharaf honour, dignity
sharīʿa Islamic law
shaṭr, dual *shaṭrayn* half; term used to denote the northern and southern part of divided Yemen prior to 1990
shaykh, pl. *mashāyikh* chief, tribal leader, head of a tribe or tribal segment
shaykh mashāyikh senior shaykh
sidr see *ʿilb*
silf, pl. *aslāf* precedent, tradition
sīra journey, biographical genre
sūq, pl. *aswāq* market
ṣulḥ negotiated settlement
ṭabaqa, pl. *ṭabaqāt* layer, biographical genre
taṣliya invocation of God's blessing upon the Prophet Muḥammad
tawzīf recruitment, enlistment
tha'r blood revenge
ṭīn mud
ʿurf, pl. *a'rāf* tribal law, customary law
wādī water course, valley
wakīl representative, deputy governor, or deputy minister
warqa, pl. *awrāq* sheet of paper, document
wijh face, honour, authority
zāmīl, pl. *zawāmīl* chant; poetic genre closely associated with tribes

Abbreviations

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
JMP	Joint Meeting Parties
NDF	National Democratic Front
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
PSO	Political Security Organization
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party

Chronology

- 1962 September Revolution and beginning of Civil War
- 1967 Siege of Sanaa
- 1970 National Reconciliation and end of Civil War
- 1972 Bayḥān massacre
Border war between YAR and PDRY
- 1974 Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī becomes president
Beginning of al-Ḥamdī's "Correctional Movement"
Birth of Mujaḥid b. Aḥmad Ḥaydar
- 1977 Assassination of Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī
Aḥmad al-Ghashmī becomes president
- 1978 Formation of pro-Ḥamdī "13 June Movement"
Battle of Jabal Aswad in Sufyān between 13 June Movement and loyalists of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar
Assassination of Aḥmad al-Ghashmī
'Alī 'Abdallāh Ṣālīḥ becomes president
Nasirist coup attempt
- 1979 Border war between YAR and PDRY
'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar establishes the Islamic Front
NDF merges with 13 June Movement
Completion of the asphalt road connecting Sanaa and Ṣa'da
- 1980 Beginning of the War of the Central Areas (*ḥarb al-Manātiq al-Wuṣṭā*)
Mujaḥid becomes government hostage
- 1981 NDF defeated
Assassination of Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Ḥaydar
- 1982 Installation of Nāji l-Shāyif as senior shaykh of Bakīl
Establishment of the GPC
Assassination of Ḥaydar b. Aḥmad Ḥaydar
- 1983 Assassination of Ḥāmis b. Aḥmad Ḥaydar
- 1984 Mujaḥid and Fayṣal Ḥaydar evacuated to al-Jawf
- 1987 Assassination of Aḥmad b. Qā'id Ḥaydar
Mujaḥid Ḥaydar becomes shaykh of Sufyān
- 1989 war of Nūriya (*ḥarb Nūriya*) in Sufyān
- 1990 Yemeni Unity, establishment of the Republic of Yemen
- 1991–93 Transition period
Tribal conferences
- 1993 Parliamentary elections

- 1994 Civil War between North and South
- 1995 Mujaḥid's first exile begins
- 2004 Mujaḥid returns to Yemen
- 2004 First Ṣa'da war between the government and Anṣār Allāh/Ḥūthīs
- 2005 Second Ṣa'da war
- 2005–06 Third Ṣa'da war
- 2006 Presidential and municipal elections
Mujaḥid's second exile begins
- 2007 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar dies
- 2011 Beginning of Arab Spring and Yemen's Change Revolution
- 2012 Ṣāliḥ resigns, 'Abd Rabbuh Hādī becomes president
- 2013 National Dialogue Conference
- 2014 'Amrān battles
Destruction of al-Aḥmar ancestral home base in al-Khamrī
Ḥūthīs seize Sanaa
- 2015 Saudi-led coalition begins war against Ḥūthīs

Introduction

1 The Silhouette of a Life

I see this book as an outcome of – and supplement to – my ethnography of the Ṣa'da wars in Yemen, the main outcome of which was the monograph *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (published in 2017). *Tribes and Politics in Yemen* aimed at reconstructing the origins of the Ḥūthī movement (also called Anṣār Allāh) in the Yemeni highlands and examining the trajectory of its struggle against the Ṣāliḥ government by giving voice to those involved in it at the grassroots level. In the course of this research I came into contact with the family histories of many shaykhs (tribal leaders), whose agency – albeit largely obscured by historiography – has shaped politics and the course of history in the northern highlands. I have been fascinated with the historical depth and complexity of these family histories ever since. The book at hand extends understandings drawn from this ethnography into the range of contemporary history and biographical reflection, by narrowing the focus to one single person and one single narrative: that of Muḥāhid b. Aḥmad b. Qā'id Ibn Ḥaydar, born in 1974 as the son of a principal shaykh into the tribal society of Sufyān in 'Amrān province.

While I came almost by accident, or good fortune, to collect Muḥāhid Ḥaydar's life history as he told it, my choice was not driven by chance. Sufyān has long been a focus of my interest, for many developments that led to the eruption of the Ṣa'da wars in 2004 seemed to converge there, and indeed one of my earliest publications on the Ḥūthī conflict attempted to make sense of what had happened in Sufyān.¹ I knew about the central role of Muḥāhid Ḥaydar in Sufyān, and there was a bit of luck involved in 2011, when I was able to contact him personally via social media, at the time of the Arab Spring and Yemen's "Change Revolution." In retrospect, it seems no coincidence that this happened during this transient window of time, when the popular uprisings led to a veritable upsurge of free speech in Yemen, and a multitude of formerly oppressed groups and individuals were struggling vigorously to make their voices heard in public.² However, after just a few weeks, Muḥāhid's social

1 Brandt 2013.

2 This period of upheaval gave rise to new research in and on Yemen and brought the issues of resistance and anti-regime social movements to the forefront. In the deeply stratified country, protest was articulated by a multitude of movements that organized themselves to resist and challenge the Ṣāliḥ regime, renegotiate issues of power and influence, and struggle for justice, participation, equality and dignity (Yadav 2011, 2015). Among these movements were

media accounts were blocked again (fortunately by then we had connected by other means), apparently for posting offensive content directed against the regime of President ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ, who was then still in power, though his regime was faltering. Indeed, at that time President Ṣāliḥ and his power apparatus were still influential and fearsome factors, and I had no idea yet about the depth of the antagonism between Mujāhid and some of Yemen’s political elites of that time.

When I first came into contact with Mujāhid, he had been living outside Yemen for several years. At first he seemed to me a person thoroughly bored in exile, and like any other veteran of Yemen’s political struggles, glad to find someone prepared to listen to his stories of past campaigns. I admit that at the outset of our acquaintance the way he gave vent to his extreme loathing of the political establishment in Sanaa irritated me and made me recoil; he clearly had an axe to grind and more than one score to settle. However, after I overcame my intuitive reserve and began to listen to and encourage his recollections, I was deeply touched by the richness and tragedy of his life. As his narrative twisted through episodes of passion, sacrifice, grief, and betrayal, the silhouette of an exceptional life emerged. By turns instructive, suspenseful, outrageous, formidable, repellent, tragic, and at times weirdly funny, his was a life story filled with a surplus of destiny and dark drama.

When my interest was aroused, I surveyed friends and acquaintances about their opinions. The survey demonstrated, quite plainly, how extremely different one and the same person can be perceived and evaluated by his own contemporaries. If the people whose opinions I sought belonged to a different camp in regard to Yemen’s competing parties, tribes, denominations, and ideologies, their partisanship was almost predetermined. When Mujāhid’s name came up for discussion, many of them expressed a strong dislike for him: to them he generally appeared as a public nuisance, troublemaker, brigand, and warlord. In contrast, those who were close to him in tribal or political terms generally regarded him as a hero and a victim of slander, conspiracy, persecution, and political machinations. Clearly, opinions differed wildly, from “best shaykh of Yemen” to “this man is a thug.” One of his peers gave him “very low

youth and civil society groups (Alwazir 2012, 2016; Durac 2016, 2022), women (Strzelecka 2017, 2018), underprivileged social strata (de Regt and Aljaedy 2022), representatives of spatial peripheries (Peutz 2012), and the large Southern Movement (Augustin 2022). Even northern Yemen’s new suzerains, the Ḥūthīs or Anṣār Allāh, began as a social movement protesting against the marginalization and discrimination of the Zaydis (Salmoni, Loidolt, Wells 2010: 81–110; Dorlian 2013; Brandt 2017a: 111–139), yet since 2014 they have evolved into oppressors and created new forms of repression (Shuja al-Deen 2022).

marks,” another remarked that he “livened things up” wherever he appeared. My closest friend in Yemen (a sayyid from Ṣa‘da), described him as “fond of troubles,” to whom “opposition and confrontation had become an attitude of mind.” Yet regardless of whether friend or foe, critic or supporter, all of those surveyed made no secret of their fascination with his passions – whether those passions were perceived as heroic or base – and the story of his life, which appeared to them as a grim, impenetrable, splendid tribal saga.

In fact, one easily fell under the spell of his narrative. A gifted raconteur, his expressiveness and eloquence were trained by years of experience in tribal leadership, the central requirements of which, as Steven Caton has shown, belongs the gift of verbal suasion,³ not by formal schooling and education. As he was used to speaking to and mobilizing large audiences, his speech featured the frankness and provocative bluntness of a straightforward campaigner. His verbal skills, mixed with a penchant for boastful talk and rodomontade that seems typical of tribal leaders in the Middle East (here I refer to Andrew Shryock’s brilliant work on Jordanian tribes),⁴ enabled him to narrate his life experiences in ways few others possessed, and to convey his narrative with all the force of his personality and, yes, panache.

My interest further increased when I became aware that the trajectory of Mujāhid’s life neatly – at times through compulsion – fit into the political history of the northern highlands. A number of supra-personal dimensions come to light in it, as his life story is closely entwined with the political history of his time. It incorporates the grievances, anxieties, struggles, and hopes of the era to a remarkable degree. His narrative provides insights not only into tribal life, but also on how he and his family experienced a number of little studied events in the recent history of the northern highlands: the tribal dynamics in the 1960s civil war; the tumultuous process of state building in the 1970s; the local ramifications of the Cold War in rural Yemen, which led to the emergence of a tribal “leftist” axis closely entangled with the Marxist National Democratic Front (NDF) in the late 1970s; the guerrilla campaigns of the War of the Central Areas (*ḥarb al-Manāṭiq al-Wuṣṭā*) between the northern and southern Yemeni sister states in the early 1980s; and finally, tribal agency in a united “democratic” Yemen in the early 1990s, in the 1994 civil war between the former North and South and, since 2004, in the Ḥūthī conflict. Mujāhid’s life as the lynchpin of this study makes it possible to concentrate and combine the sequences of these events in a single iconography. By giving voice to one who has lived

3 See Caton 1987, 1990, 2005, 2021. He argues that the basis of power among Middle Eastern tribespeople is persuasion rather than the exercise of force.

4 Shryock 1997.

through and, to a certain extent, contributed to shape these events, his biography allows for the expression of an indigenous voice and emic account while, at the same time, elucidating the ethnographic and historical frameworks that inform it and render it intelligible. The result is a profound insight into tribal agency and the turbulent relation between tribes and the government(s) in republican northern Yemen.

One of the distinctive features of Mujāhid's life is its close inter-relation with the lives of northern Yemen's two most prominent political figures, namely long-time President 'Alī 'Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ (r. 1978–2011, d. 2017) and Shaykh 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who was revered by many as the "shaykh of shaykhs" of Yemen until his death in 2007, and who was a tribal leader of supreme political importance from the 1962 revolution onward. At the heart of Mujāhid's narrative is the historic rivalry between the al-Aḥmar family and the Ḥaydar family over influence in their common home area: 'Amrān province north of Sanaa. Mujāhid's narrative testifies to how the steadily increasing political and religious tensions following Ṣāliḥ's ascent to power in 1979 impacted these families' rivalry. Against the background of Ṣāliḥ's efforts to consolidate his regime and to establish patronage ties, this rivalry resulted in a blood feud between the Ḥaydar and al-Aḥmar families, one that claimed the lives of dozens of people, including those of Mujāhid's father and his three elder brothers. The world of politics further impacted the context of this feud when president Ṣāliḥ stepped in and tried to manipulate and steer Mujāhid's desire for revenge and use it to control and contain the politically overambitious 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. As a result, the destinies of these three actors became intertwined, until they eventually revolved around a hidden axis of intrigue and political calculation. Exploring the intricacies of Ṣāliḥ's policy of manipulation vis-à-vis these tribal leaders, it is possible to extrapolate the very essence of his governance approach, which enabled him to remain at the helm of a troubled state for over three decades: an exercise of power which he himself likened to a "dance on the heads of snakes" (*raqṣ 'alā ru'ūs al-tha'ābīn*).⁵ The "snake" motif and the notions of hostility, betrayal, and deceit it conveys are indeed a noteworthy element of this triangular constellation; Mujāhid himself once remarked that they interacted like "entwined serpents."⁶ These three people, their destinies entangled, became part of a constellation in which they meet with all the force of a classic drama.

5 See Ṣāliḥ's interview with Robert F. Worth (2008).

6 See Chapter 4.

Yet whilst the prominence of Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar radiates far beyond Yemen, Mujaḥid Ḥaydar is known to far fewer people. This is partly due to the fact that the great events of his life were concentrated in rather short episodes (1987–1994 and 2004–2006), which were overshadowed by long episodes of obscurity and isolation in exile. We must delve into the undergrowth of history if, amid the glare of the events and the legendary light radiated by Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar, we wish to become aware of his presence at all. Researchers, especially those in disciplines that generalize and operate with a top-down approach, often follow the patterns of power, and normally only come into contact with politically influential shaykhs residing in Sanaa – the powerful, famous, rich “city shaykhs” living in fancy mansions – who in turn shape their view and reproduce and reinforce common patterns of interpretation and discourses of the ruling elites. Those shaykhs in opposition to the regime, by contrast, were barred from entering Sanaa and other power centres; they were not covered in the media and were not given airtime in mainstream TV outlets. Mujaḥid was one of these “non-persons” of the Ṣāliḥ era: those whose names and existences were denied and ignored and whose narratives were suppressed, especially because of the political “misdemeanours” which he and his like frequently committed and which unsettled and disturbed the political elites. Hence, Mujaḥid belongs to those people who are normally not taken into account by researchers. It is precisely the bottom-up approach of social anthropology that invites us to see these “non-persons” or (in Denis-Constant Martin’s phrase) “objets politiques non-identifiés,” whose narratives and discourses are often ignored, suppressed, and marginalised, but are nonetheless meaningful as counter-narratives that question and challenge established discourses of domination.⁷

2 An Anthropology of “Proud Refusal”

Already it is apparent that resistance and opposition to the prevailing power structures in the Ṣāliḥ era were the grand themes in Mujaḥid’s momentous life. His narrative has a special feature: it retells Yemeni history from the vantage point of one in constant opposition to the Ṣāliḥ regime and its representatives. In Mujaḥid’s case, his firm opposition and associated status as an outsider and “non-person” in the political system render his narrative an alternative discourse that retells the recent history of Yemen from a suppressed, “peripheral” point of view. As the grand themes of his life, his motives of resistance

⁷ Martin 2002.

(*mu'āriḍa*) and “proud refusal” (*ibā'*) run through his narrative, produce his life story, and enable him to offer a complementary view of recent Yemeni history “from the margins.”

In anthropology, the concept of resistance refers to “efforts by those not in power or who are subjects of power to push back through protest and other forms of opposition against social policies or practices they find oppressive, imposing, or unjust.”⁸ Thus, resistance is closely linked to concepts of power and hegemony, as mirrored in even briefer definition of resistance as “a challenge to power or domination.”⁹ In anthropology and the social sciences, the scholarly debate on the concept of resistance began relatively late, in the mid-1980s, with a critical re-examination of the works of Émile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose works emphasize stasis, equilibrium, and the maintenance of the social order, hence portraying relatively stable social structures that tended to reproduce themselves. This critical debate led to a reassessment of the agency and autonomy of the individual and the subject in social theory. Inspired by the scholarship of Antonio Gramsci, Eric Wolf (who in turn echoed Karl Marx’s models of class conflict), and Pierre Bourdieu, social theory began to shift its focus from order and stability to transformation, conflict, and hence also resistance, primarily in the shape of organized forms of resistance, such as revolt and revolution, later also in the form of everyday types of resistance.¹⁰ Inspired by Gramsci, postcolonial and subaltern studies in particular developed a lasting influence. The scholarly debate on subaltern studies, which originates from the South Asian colonial context, focuses on the agency of oppressed and marginalized groups, and on the exploration and rehabilitation of their views and perspectives.¹¹ Subaltern studies are driven by the assumption that these perspectives were previously marginalized by historiography, which was dominated by hegemonic forces and elite and colonial knowledge. Subaltern and postcolonial studies frame resistance not as a class struggle (as Marx did), but pursue a non-universalist approach that recognizes the agency of individuals and small groups vis-à-vis hegemonic forces. A central aim of postcolonial studies is the writing of alternative histories “from below,” in particular histories of subaltern communities and people who make up the “people without history.”¹²

8 Halliburton 2018: 1.

9 Wright 2016: 3.

10 On the history and development of the term resistance in anthropology, see, for example, Wright 2016 and Halliburton 2018.

11 See, for example, Guha 1997; Chakrabarty 2002.

12 Wolf 1982: 385.

The recognition of “subaltern autonomy” – the expression coined by Ranajit Guha – opened the door to a consideration of a wide range of forms of resistance. One of the most influential concepts became James Scott’s “everyday acts of resistance”: expressions of resistance that are not organized in broader social, political, or ideological movements, but are acts of disobedience and assertions of agency by individuals or small groups in everyday settings and in the absence of organized revolution or formal protest.¹³ These everyday acts of resistance took place throughout history, and continue to take place whenever groups or individuals resist domination. They can take on an infinite range of organized and non-organized expressions, and occur on all levels of social hierarchy.

The turn to everyday acts of resistance engendered an interest in the role of their special social and local contexts: the reassessment of the interplay between local and personal agency and strategies of resistance. Exploring these dynamics that integrate prevalent moral and value systems into acts of resistance remotely echoes Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” which revolves around the influence of customary modes of being and behaving on the way an individual manoeuvres in society.¹⁴ In a similar vein, it also draws on James Scott’s “hidden transcripts”: the inward, often hidden discourses among resistance groups, a careful consideration of which enables us to more fully understand their motivations.¹⁵ Postcolonial approaches to the concept of resistance are informed by the assumption that acts of resistance by individuals and groups are always embedded in local specificities. These “multi-dimensional dialectics” have been, increasingly, the focus of anthropologists, who have set out to explore their manifold forms.¹⁶ The concept of everyday resistance has been applied to a broad spectrum of activities, from rebellion and sabotage to strategic inaction, poetry, humour, dress, queering, excess, and many more. A point in case is the Palestinian *ṣumūd*, which translates as “steadfastness,” but is locally defined more broadly and embraces much more than just resistance, as it is an embodiment of morality and often piety. “Resistance” thus encompasses an attitude towards power, but also incorporates local moral, religious, social, and cultural elements.¹⁷

13 Scott 1985.

14 Bourdieu 1977.

15 Scott 1990.

16 Dousset and Nayral (eds.) 2019: 2.

17 See Schiocchet 2013, 2015, 2022: 183–200. The expression *ṣumūd* is also common in Yemen, particularly among the Ḥūthī, yet so far its application and use have not been explored by scholars.

Working with a life story necessarily involves a search for these crucial imprints and determinants. The same is true for postcolonial approaches to life-writing, hence conceptually it involves the constant attempt to arrive at a bottom-up articulation of indigenous frameworks. Informed by these theoretical considerations, this book attempts to arrive at an understanding of how Mujāhid himself conceptualised his surroundings and his agency within them, and to explore and reconstruct the embeddedness of his resistance strategy against the Ṣāliḥ regime in the local specificities of northern highland Yemen. This book attempts to understand how his agency was informed and sustained by the social order and local setting in which he grew up and operated: the prevailing local social rules, practices, customs, and traditions of tribalism that he deeply internalized and that informed his mindset, the trajectory of his life, and his lifelong struggle. The possibilities of Mujāhid's personal agency unfold in this field of tension between the self, the social and ecological environment in his home area of Sufyān, and the specific political, ideological, and religious situation of his time. This research has been a prolonged effort to understand the dynamics of the interplay between Mujāhid's specific role and situation in Sufyān, the "transcript" of tribalism, and the politics of resistance vis-à-vis the experience of political domination that emerges from it. This transcript is, however, never "hidden." The tribal matrix and the recourse to tribalism are clear and at the very heart of Mujāhid's narrative; throughout his life he challenged the regime openly and boldly and without ever resorting to the "weapons of the weak."¹⁸

The importance of the tribal transcript becomes particularly evident when we consider the trajectory of the conflict between the Ḥaydar and al-Aḥmar families, a struggle that before 1981 was informed by inter-tribal rivalries and land disputes, and after 1981 began to follow the rules of a tribal blood feud.¹⁹ This blood feud evolved out of the tribal matrix of Yemen's northern highlands, and tribal rules, customs, and procedures determined its trajectory. Notions of tribal honour inform the morality of this process, and to those operating in this system of feuding, these appear as a legitimate way of enacting justice and restoring "moral balance." For the observer, this sometimes results in a moral dilemma: While the consideration of the feuding context lends ethnographic richness and depth to Mujāhid's account and makes it comprehensible, at times it also renders his narrative disturbing, repellent, and grisly. The consideration

18 According to Scott (1990: 17), weak groups seldom rebel or protest openly against dominant powers, but rather resort to "hidden" strategies, such as anonymous attacks on property, poaching, character assassination, and shunning.

19 The rules of tribal vengeance and feuding are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

of the feuding context touches on what Sherry Ortner has called “dark anthropology,” for it captures the moral ambivalence and darker sides of both tribalism and Mujāhid’s individual agency, and does not exclude, in Ortner’s words, “the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them.”²⁰ While cooperating with Mujāhid, I experienced first-hand that listening to and writing about an individual who has witnessed egregious acts of violence and (this was even more upsetting) readily reciprocated them, can be deeply disturbing. Indeed researching and writing about these “hard, sad topics” can be difficult and distressing.²¹

I am well aware that, for a number of reasons, writing on tribes, tribalism, and feuding has its own challenges. On the one hand, the recourse to feuding and violence seems to reinforce tenacious preconceptions about the violence inherent in tribalism, which is often perceived as a threat to peace and civility. In 1971, shortly after Yemen’s civil war (1962–70), Yemeni intellectual Zayd al-Wazīr referred to the tribes as “the strongest power [in Yemen] since ancient times,” yet also pointed out their ambivalent role in the political history of Yemen by referring to them as both “the armour which has protected Yemen against every aggressor and the sword which has sometimes pierced the body of the community.”²² In past decades, anthropologists and scholars working on tribes in Yemen have strived to rectify this negative image and emphasized the supreme importance of cooperation, community commitment, and mediation and conflict resolution among Yemen’s tribal societies – the works of Najwa Adra, Shelagh Weir, and Nadwa al-Dawsari stand out here.²³ Nevertheless, tribes remained the object of suspicion in many quarters, even in Yemen itself, particularly among urban and peri-urban circles and in less tribal lower and southern Yemen, all of which were, throughout their history, repeatedly exposed to raiding campaigns by northern tribes. In 2011, Yemen’s Change Revolution seemed to be an opportunity for the tribes to improve their public perception; during this revolution, masses of tribespeople peacefully demonstrated alongside other groups of protesters demanding greater political rights, justice, and equality. Many of them joined the demonstrations unarmed. Ross Porter, who did fieldwork on Yemen’s Sāḥat al-Taghayyir (Change Square) at that time, argued that by laying down their arms and joining the protests unarmed – and even instructing their fellow tribesmen not to avenge deaths in case they were killed by the regime during the uprising – the tribes turned away from old role

20 Ortner 2016: 49.

21 McGranahan 2020b.

22 Al-Wazīr 1971: 173.

23 See Adra 1982; Adra 1988; Adra 2021; Weir 2007; al-Dawsari 2012; and al-Dawsari 2014.

models and patterns of behaviour, and hence not only demanded, but rather enacted the desired change.²⁴ The upheavals were seen as an opportunity for tribes to rectify their image as a backward, conservative, and militaristic force, and to actively participate in building a democratic and civil Yemen. Yet when the Change Revolution became increasingly brutal and violence spread like wildfire, the tribes were pushed back into old patterns and roles and became (again) deeply engaged in waging a war in and for Yemen.

Added to this is the difficulty of the term “tribe”; it is one of many controversial concepts in anthropology: on the one hand because of its incoherence – it has been applied to a multitude of groups in different parts of the world – and the associated difficulties of devising a viable definition. On the other hand because of its historical burdens, the concept of tribe has had a particularly unfortunate career during the Euro-American colonial expansions. As a tool of colonial domination, the label “tribe” was indiscriminately superimposed on societies that were then – in line with the evolutionist understanding of history at that time – considered “primitive,” “uncivilized,” or “underdeveloped.”²⁵ Consequently, in postcolonial times the term tribe was widely criticized and often abandoned as an analytical term or a general comparative category. Many Western scholars became hesitant to consider “tribe” an analytical concept in Yemen, and preferred to replace the term with more generic and less loaded terms such as “principality,” “community,” or “ethnic group.”²⁶ In regard to northern Yemen, however, a look at the output of Yemeni scholarship suggests that these Western theoretical discussions often seem to override local concerns and the indigenous record in Yemen. Northern Yemen has never been subjected to colonial rule, and “tribe” is one (of many) local emic concepts of collective sociopolitical identity and representation that exists side by side with other local conceptions and social strata: the sayyids (pl. *sāda*), the great mass of non-tribal people (whose number certainly surpasses that of those who consider themselves tribal), as well as various underprivileged groups, all of whom have been addressed by anthropologists studying Yemen.

Indigenous Yemeni scholarship is awash in studies of the structures, territories, histories, customs, and politics of the Yemeni tribes, beginning with al-Hamdānī's (1940) famous multi-volume *Kitāb al-Iklīl*, written in the tenth

24 Porter 2016: 61–63; see also Caton, al-Eryani and Aryani 2014.

25 See, for example, Yapp 1983: 154.

26 On further details of this ongoing discussion, see the definitions of the term “tribe” in Southall 1996, Gingrich 2015, Sneath 2016. For critical positions regarding the meaning and applicability, or even replacement, of the term “tribe” in Yemen, see Mundy 1995: 4–7; Mundy 2013: 5–6; Wedeen 2008: 170–176; Blumi 2010: 23–26; and Blumi 2018: 26, 134–135.

century CE and dealing with the genealogies and history of the Qaḥṭānī tribes of South Arabia, and Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī's theological, philological, historical and poetic works from the twelfth century. The following overview of Yemeni indigenous scholarship on tribes and tribalism highlights the extraordinary richness and diversity of Yemeni scholarship on the subject of tribalism and is testimony to its enduring importance to the Yemeni people.

After the 1962 revolution, which ended a millennium of sayyid dominance and sayyid historiography, the body of Yemeni studies on tribes and tribalism increased enormously. These include studies on tribal history, structures and territories such as Sharaf al-Dīn's *Dirāsāt fī ansāb qabā'il al-yaman* (1981), Luqmān's *Tārīkh al-qabā'il al-yamaniyya* (1985), al-Baṣrāwī's *Mashriq al-yaman al-sa'īd* (1985), Abū Sudayrah's *al-Qabā'il al-yamaniyya fī miṣr* (1988), Dīb's *al-Yaman hiya al-aṣl* (1988), al-Maqhaḥī's seminal work *Mu'jam al-buldān wa-l-qabā'il al-yamaniyya* (1988), and al-Ḥajrī's equally important *Majmū' buldān al-yaman wa-qabā'ilihā* (1996).

Tribal customs, traditions, and customary law are another focus of interest among indigenous Yemeni scholars. These include Abū Ghānim's *al-Bunya al-qabaliyya fī l-yaman bayn al-istimrār wa-l-taghyir* (1985), al-'Alimī's *al-Qaḍā' al-qabālī fī l-mujtama' al-yamanī* (1988), Muṣṭafā's edited volume *Zāhirat al-tha'r fī l-yaman* (2004) on feuding, al-Khawm's remarkable *Sīrat al-awā'il fī shurū' al-qabā'il* (2013) on the customs and traditions of the tribes of Khawlān b. 'Āmir, and al-Qayfī's *Qabila Qayfa madhḥijīyya* (undated). Ṣayyād's massive two-volume work *Wathīqat al-qawā'id: al-marj'īyya al-'urfīyya li-kāfat al-qabā'il al-yamaniyya* is a compendium of tribal law and precedent written from a practitioner's standpoint. Also noteworthy are al-Mikhlāfī's recent endeavours to make accessible to the Yemeni people famous manuscripts dealing with tribal customs and traditions; these manuscripts were taken to Europe by Western scholars. Among the newly published manuscripts are annotated editions of the historical *Kitāb al-'urf wa-l-silf* (2022) and *Kitāb al-Man': Qawā'id al-qānūn al-'urfī l-yamaniyya* (2022).

Another area of prime interest is tribe-state relations in republican Yemen. Here Yemeni scholarship includes 'Abd al-Salām's *al-Jumhūrīyya bayn al-saltāna wa-l-qabāla fī l-yaman al-shamālī* (1988), Abū Ghānim's *al-Qabila wa-l-dawla fī l-yaman* (1990), al-Bakr's *Ḥarb al-yaman: al-qabila tantaṣir 'alā l-dawla* (1995), al-Zāhirī's *al-Dawr al-siyāsī li-l-qabila fī l-yaman, 1962–1990* (1996), al-Mas'ūdī's *al-Yaman al-mu'āṣir: min al-qabila ilā l-dawla, 1911–1967* (2006), al-Quṣayr's *Tahdīth al-yaman wa-l-tadakhul bayn al-dawla wa-l-qabila* (2006), al-'Abdalī's *Thaqāfat al-dīmuqrāṭīyya fī l-ḥayā al-siyāsīyya li-qabā'il al-yaman* (2007), al-Sharjabī's *al-Dīwān wa-l-qasr: al-dawr al-siyāsī li-qabila fī l-yaman* (2009), and al-Mawlā's *al-Yaman al-sa'īd wa-sirā'āt al-dīn wa-l-qabila* (2011).

In addition, there is a genre of personal memory and biographical reflection from Yemen's tribal realm (see also the following section in this chapter in which I discuss biography and life-writing in Yemen). This genre includes the autobiographies written by tribal shaykhs such as Sinān Abū Laḥūm's *al-Yaman: Ḥaqā'iq wa-wathā'iq 'ishtuhā* (2004), 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's *Qaḍāyā wa-mawāqif* (2008), 'Alī Ṣāliḥ Khalāqī's *al-Shaykh Aḥmad Abū Bakr al-Naqīb: Shaykh al-mūsīṭah, naqīb Yāfi': ḥayātuhu wa-istishhāduhu fī wathā'iq wa-ash'ār, 1905–1963* (2007), al-Ruwayshān's *Shahāda min al-rīf* (1997), as well as two biographies of Shaykh 'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'ī of Murād: Qā'id's and al-Zumur's *'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'ī: Dirāsa fī l-ab'ād al-baṭūliya min ḥayyātihi wa-shi'rihi* (undated) and al-Qarda'ī's and al-'Amrī's *al-Shahīd al-shaykh 'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'ī, 1885–1948m: Dirāsā ta'ṣīliyya fī kifāhihi wa-shi'rihi wa-dawr Murād wa-l-qabila al-yamaniyya fī l-kifāh wa-l-thawra* (1999).

The concept of the tribe has an enormous historical depth and continuity. The origin of many of today's tribal names and structures, genealogies, territories, and borders can be traced back over centuries, and central principles of tribal customary law (*urf*) are well documented in Yemen's historical manuscript sources and are still applied today. In northern and eastern Yemen tribes still constitute a possible organizational unit around which rural communities may converge, particularly in times of state weakness. However, the situation in northern and eastern Yemen differs from lower and southern Yemen. Although in southern Yemen "tribe" is also a fixed emic concept of considerable antiquity and resilience, from the mid-nineteenth century tribalism was exposed to massive external intervention by the changing governments of southern Yemen. British colonial rule in Aden and the protectorates involved the creation and stabilization of artificial structures and positions of hierarchy and authority (which led to the emergence of "sultans" and "emirs," whose relationships to their "subjects" was more like that between landlords and tenants).²⁷ After southern independence in 1967, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY) expelled these "tribal" provincial rulers and set about weakening tribal structures and affiliations, which were seen as remnants of a colonial past and an obstacle to the building of a modern Marxist society.²⁸ After 1990, especially after the 1994 civil war, northern President 'Alī 'Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ tried to re-establish tribal structures in order to extend his power into the southern regions of Yemen: this was an equally disingenuous endeavour that led to further resentments vis-à-vis tribes among the people of the south.²⁹

27 Bujra 1971: 13–14; Ismael and Ismael 1986: 10; and Wedeen 2008: 29–31.

28 Lackner 1985: 110–112.

29 Elie 2009.

In order to address these problems related to the concept of tribe, Andre Gingrich suggests that “an active reformulation [of the term tribe] where empirically appropriate might be the more productive alternative” to abandoning the term altogether.³⁰ While agreeing that the concept of tribe carries a heavy historical and ideological burden and that a precise definition remains almost impossible, he advocates for the use of the term as “equivalent to certain vernacular or national legal terms referring to local conceptions of collective socio-political identity.”³¹ In line with Gingrich’s working definition, tribes can be seen as entities displaying a combination of three basic characteristics. First, they are usually associated with a territory, but use non-territorial criteria (such as *qabyala*)³² to distinguish between members and non-members. Second, the genealogical aspect is essential: tribal members usually share some dominant idiom of common origin, such as (most often putative and imagined) descent from a common, long-deceased ancestor whose position in the larger genealogical framework determines the (likewise mostly putative) kinship relations to other tribal communities. Real or imagined common descent emphasizes group cohesion over outside interests and internal differentiation, particularly in times of conflict, locally termed *‘aşabiyya*.³³ Third, tribes are not closed, self-contained systems, but open entities that maintain lively relations with their (tribal and non-tribal) environments.³⁴

The third point, in particular, is fundamentally important for this study. Taking into account the social, political, and historical contexts of his life story, Mujāhid’s biography provides ample evidence that the tribal paradigm, albeit important, is never “undiluted”: taken in isolation, tribalism is insufficient to fully portray his situation and explain his agency and the trajectory of his life. Rather, Mujāhid’s perceptions and decisions are permanently impacted by various paradigms, none of which can be seen in isolation, for the tribal “transcript” permanently encounters and dynamically interacts with the social, ecological, economic, political, ideological, and religious conditions of his time and thus produces the possibilities of his agency. The confluence of these paradigms rather engenders “dynamic spaces of negotiation.”³⁵ It is precisely these

30 Gingrich 2015: 647.

31 Gingrich 2015: 647.

32 The concept of *qabyala* (tribalness) synthesizes the multiple local understandings of tribalism as a moral, social, political, legal, and aesthetic system. See Adra 1982; Adra 1988; Adra 2021; and Caton 1990: 25–49.

33 *‘Aşabiyya* is a sense of social cohesion and solidarity that is often at work in tribal societies, particularly in times of perceived external threat. For an overview, see Levanoni 2016.

34 Gingrich 2015: 647.

35 Fountain 2016: 163.

encounters and dynamic interactions of different spheres and paradigms that the tribal *zāmil* (poetic chant) at the beginning of the book describes as the “time of opening” (*‘aṣr al-infitāḥ*). As Mujāhid negotiated paradigms and navigated the world, his life became an arena where these various paradigms met, and his agency and engagement were produced across them.

3 Biography and the Ethnographic Venture

Whereas the value of ethnographic methods in the study of individual agency in everyday settings and quotidian resistance is widely recognized, it is precisely the ethnographic element that is often lacking in scholarship on resistance, leading to the interpretation that most studies on resistance are characterized by three forms of “ethnographic refusal”: a “thinning of culture,” a “sanitizing of politics,” and a “dissolution of the actors.”³⁶ The effect being that studies on resistance often lack this ethnographic “thick description” which is necessary to produce understanding.³⁷ Ortner argues in detail that through “sanitizing politics” (itself often a by-product of the emergence of “engaged anthropology,” which takes sides with its subjects) negative aspects, forms of ambivalence, inequality, asymmetry, and internal conflict (in sum, the “dark” element) of resistance groups and movements are often obscured. As a result, they are depicted in rather whitewashed and idealized terms. “Cultural thinning” refers to the fact that the local context, which “informs, shapes, and underpins resistance at least as much as it emerges situationally from it,” is only superficially touched upon.³⁸ The tendency to “dissolve actors” engenders a de-essentialization of subjects and a disregard of the agency of individuals and “its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds.”³⁹

The biographical approach offers a viable avenue of re-essentializing the subject and shifting the focus on understanding an individual’s agency in everyday settings while avoiding the traps of “thin description” and “ethnographic refusal.” Certainly the biographical approach can only succeed if it examines insights into the inner life of the individual. Yet in comparison with

36 Ortner 1995.

37 The term “thick description” was developed by Clifford Geertz, who used it to describe the most detailed possible description of human social action in its own context, see Geertz 1973.

38 Ortner 1995: 181.

39 Ortner 1995: 186.

literary biographies that often pay special attention to an individual's interior life, in anthropology, opinions vary as to how helpful it is to consider the psychodynamic dimensions and motivations of an individual. It has been argued that anthropology is concerned with contextualizing individual life and hence "immerses the reader deeply within a social, cultural, historical, and political context rather than deeply within the psyche of an individual."⁴⁰ By contrast, some call for the consideration of individual, subjective, psychodynamic characteristics and motivations for action, as this enables us to understand how "individuals learn a system of cultural meanings, internalize and draw upon these meanings and, as a result, are motivated to act in ways that are, at times, contrary to dominant powers and beliefs."⁴¹ In recording Mujāhid's life story, I prioritize the contextualization of his individual agency with his social and sociopolitical environments. At times, however, I also point out certain aspects of his agency that might not be fully comprehensible without recourse to his interior life and his very character.

While the biographical approach that takes the form of life story interviews is a well-established method in anthropology, biographical monographs are a rather rare genre and occur most frequently in histories of the discipline, i.e., biographies of anthropologists themselves.⁴² Nevertheless, anthropology has also produced a growing body of biographical monographs and life-histories that aim to record, communicate, and contextualize lived experience and situate the people they study in their specific social contexts.⁴³ Since the publication of Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder* (1926), the life story of a Winnebago Indian (regarded as one of the first works in anthropological biography), the interest in life stories and their potential to make ethnographic research accessible through shifting the perspective on lived experience has constantly increased; however, the genre remains somewhat on the periphery of the discipline. Prominent examples of anthropological life histories are Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (1961), a panoramic and intimate account of life and agency in conditions of extreme poverty in urban Mexico; Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981), which retells the life of a Kalahari desert woman of hunter-gatherers,

40 Goldstein 2020: 81.

41 Seymour 2006: 304.

42 The increasingly popular genre of auto-ethnographies by researchers reflecting on their own roles should also be mentioned here. For an overview and introduction see, for example, Carsten, Day, and Stafford 2018.

43 On different ways of approaching life histories in different disciplines, see for example Caetano and Nico (eds.) 2022.

as she narrated it; and Dale Eickelman's *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (1985), the social biography of a Moroccan Berber judge that traces his way through the traditional Islamic educational system in Morocco and, by doing so, explores more general issues of historical and social thought in twentieth-century Morocco. A further example is Michael Herzfeld's *Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis* (1998), whose life history exemplifies the emphasis on manhood and violence (in relation to the feuding context for which Crete is so well known) and who faced persecution and torture during Greece's military dictatorship.

In the field of Middle Eastern studies, biographical monographs and life stories are not abundant. This is particularly true for biographies of tribespeople; the reasons for this are manifold, and include scholars' unease with the concept of tribe (as discussed above), the paucity of written sources, and the challenges of working with oral discourse.⁴⁴ One of the rare examples of a biography of a tribal individual is Yoav Alon's *The Shaykh of Shaykhs: Mithqal al-Fayiz and Tribal Leadership in Modern Jordan* (2016), which revolves around a prominent Jordanian shaykh (d. 1967) and his role in the formation and consolidation of the Emirate of Transjordan. Based on interviews with his descendants and archival material, Alon provides a detailed contextualization of tribal life and tribal leadership with history, society, and politics of twentieth-century Jordan. Mithqāl al-Fāyiz was a shaykh whose largely pro-state attitude played an important role in the stabilization of modern Jordan. In some respects, Shaykh Mithqāl's role and agency in Jordan parallels that of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar (d. 2007) in Yemen.

In Yemen itself, the production of biography has long mirrored prevalent elite constellations and discourses. Before the 1962 revolution, biographical literature was primarily featured in the *sīra* and *ṭabaqāt* genres. The quasi-hagiographical *sīra* – a genre that conceives of life as a “journey” – was modelled after the biography of the Prophet and served to record, for posterity, information about the life of Yemen's Islamic rulers.⁴⁵ An early example of this is *Sīrat al-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn*, compiled by 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Ubaydallāh al-'Abbāsī l-'Alawī, which deals with the arrival and the life of the first Zaydi imam in Yemen, Yaḥyā l-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq (d. 911) in the Ṣa'da area and his attempts to establish his rule over Yemen's northern tribes.⁴⁶ Al-'Alawī

44 On these challenges, see Shryock 1997.

45 On the origins and development of classical Arabic biography, see Cooperson 2000. On the *sīra* genre in general, see Raven 2012.

46 Al-'Abbāsī l-'Alawī 1981. For a partial translation of the *sīra*, see Arendonk 1919 (Dutch) and 1960 (French).

documents Imam al-Hādī's efforts to uphold and extend his sway and to spread the Zaydi school and *sharī'a* law among the tribes.⁴⁷ Imam al-Hādī's biography marks the beginning of Yemen's long tradition of *sīra* literature, a tradition in which members of the tribal stratum seldom appear except in relation to their opposition to or support of a succession of imams.

In addition to the *sīra* genre, the Yemeni literary and cultural-historical tradition between the thirteenth and nineteenth century also includes the biographical tradition of the *ṭabaqāt* literature. The word *ṭabaqāt* denotes "layers," "strata," or "the degrees, ranks, orders, or classes, of men."⁴⁸ These are collections of biographies of varying length and structure that serve to document and trace connections, such as teacher-pupil relations, and hence trace relations between the learned ('*ulamā'*) and the transmission of (Islamic) knowledge among them. *Ṭabaqāt* biographies also include some short biographical accounts of (learned) women.⁴⁹ Moreover, the *ṭabaqāt* record biographies of distinguished people who held influential political positions (rulers, sultans) or were in some way considered role models; thus, these included Sufi shaykhs, and even household eunuchs.⁵⁰ The *ṭabaqāt* served two main purposes: on the one hand, they elaborated existing discourses of domination and legitimacy. On the other hand, they communicated role models and thus contributed to "shaping the identities of the [local] communities."⁵¹ They were written to foster remembrance of exemplary members of Yemeni society, and to encourage future generations to emulate them and their struggles to prevail against evil in the world, keep the wicked in check, and promote goodness.⁵² Historiography and biography of the *sīra* and *ṭabaqāt* genres considers tribal people only insofar as they entered the boundaries of the narrow perspective of these "exemplars of virtue, paragons of justice, pious followers of the right belief."⁵³ It goes without saying that this was rarely the case. If they appeared at all, Zaydi historiography presented the tribes as the very cause of "evil" and "wickedness" in

47 On the relationship between al-Hādī and the tribes of Ṣa'da at the time of al-Hādī, see Gochenour 1984; Heiss 1989, 1998. On Zaydism, see Hovden 2016.

48 Lane 1863–1872: 1827a–b.

49 For some biographical sketches of fourteenth-century learned women, see Bruck 2018: 207–214.

50 Examples of persons from different social strata in *ṭabaqāt* literature can be found in Heiss 2022 (on Sufis); Varisco 2021, and Mahoney 2022 (on sultans); Moorthy Kloss 2021 (on eunuchs).

51 Heiss 2022: 142.

52 Hereby echoing the Zaydi principle of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar*). On this principle, see Cook 2000.

53 Heiss 2022: 126.

the world: apostasy, customary law (*tāghūt*), insurrection, chaos, raiding, and plunder.

After the 1962 revolution that ended a millennium of sayyid rule in Yemen's north, this shift in the power structure was also reflected in Yemen's biographical production. The change in system that resulted from the 1962 revolution contributed to the new prominence of members of non-sayyid, non-elite social strata, those who had not previously been the focus of biographical production; this change brought them into the spotlight of biographical production and thus they became the focus of cultural memory.⁵⁴ Members of the old elites (mainly the sayyids and the *qāḍīs*) continued to invest in (auto) biographical productions – examples include the autobiographies *Riyāḥ al-taghyir fi l-yaman* by Aḥmad al-Shāmī (1984) and *Min al-falakah ilā l-dukura wa-l-wisām* by 'Abbās Zabārah (2008), and Aḥmad al-Wazīr's biography on 'Alī b. 'Abdallāh al-Wazīr (1987). In the decades after the revolution, however, the production of biographies and autobiographies on non-learned, non-saintly, non-sayyid and non-*qāḍī* people gained impetus, often (but not always) recording the lives of public figures who in one way or another represented the new republican elites. There exists a large group of biographies and autobiographies of shaykhs and politicians (and some shaykhs who were also politicians), such as Shaykh Sinān Abū Laḥūm's massive autobiography *al-Yaman: Ḥaqā'iq wa-wathā'iq 'ishtuhā* (2004); Shaykh 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's autobiography *Qadāyā wa-mawāqif* (2008); al-Yāzīlī's *Min al-thawra al-bikr ilā l-thawra al-umm* (2002), a biographical approach to the Abū Rās family and specifically the life of Shaykh Amīn Abū Rās; Khalāqī's biography (2007) of Shaykh Aḥmad Abū Bakr al-Naqīb from Yāfi'; Qaddāl and al-Qu'ayṭī's biography (2001) of Sulṭān 'Alī b. Ṣalāḥ al-Qu'ayṭī; and al-Ṭurayḥī's *Tārīkh al-usra al-iryāniyya* (2015), the latter being a historical account of the extensive al-Iryānī *qāḍī* clan who managed to maintain and even strengthen its political clout after 1962. The lives of martyrs of the anti-imamic movement are immortalized in biographical writing, including al-Shu'aybi's biography of 'Abdallāh al-Luqayya (1989) and two biographies of kingslayer Shaykh 'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'i: Qā'id and al-Zumur's *'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'i: Dirāsa fi l-ab'ād al-baṭūliyya min ḥayyātihi wa-shi'rihi* (undated) and al-Qarda'i and al-'Amrī's *al-Shahīd al-shaykh 'Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda'i, 1885–1948m: Dirāsa ta'ṣiliyya fi kifāhihi wa-shi'rihi wa-dawr Murād wa-l-qabīla al-yamaniyya fi l-kifāh wa-l-thawra* (1999). Added to this is the genre of personal memoirs of politicians with an autobiographical

54 The correlation between social transformation and biographical production is a very common phenomenon, compare Unseld 2014 on similar developments in music history.

element, such as Muḥsin al-‘Aynī’s *Khamsūn ‘āman fī l-rimāl al-mutaḥharrika* (2000), Sālim Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad’s *al-Ghurba laysat waṭanan* (2007), ‘Alī Nāṣir Muḥammad’s *Dhākirat waṭan* (2019), Aḥmad Muḥammad Nu‘mān’s political memoirs (2004), and the biographical output of the republican regimes after 1962, i.e., the various biographical (quasi-hagiographical) accounts of the presidents ‘Abdallāh al-Sallāl, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, and ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ. In the field of novelists and intellectuals we can mention the autobiographical works of Zayd Muṭī‘ Dammāj,⁵⁵ *Anā wa-l-ḥayā* by ‘Abdallāh Sālim Bā Wazīr (2007), Aḥmad ‘Alī Hamadānī’s biography of the lawyer Muḥammad ‘Alī Luqmān,⁵⁶ and Qaddāl’s biography of the Ḥaḍramī teacher and intellectual of Sudanese origin al-Qaddāl Bāshā.⁵⁷ For the first time, biographies of formerly neglected communities such as Yemeni Jews were also published, for example, that of Rabbi Elia Bar Shalom Giyat, a member of the Manākhah Jewish community.⁵⁸ Finally, the life stories of women from various social backgrounds are considered in biographical productions: Ibrāhīm al-Wazīr’s biography *Zahrā’ al-Yaman: Umm fī ghimār thawra* on Fāṭima Abū Rās,⁵⁹ the autobiographies *The Tears of Sheba* by Khadija al-Salamī,⁶⁰ and *Yatimat al-aḥzān min ḥawādith al-zamān* by Taqīyya Ḥamīd al-Dīn.⁶¹ This overview is far from complete, but does show some of the biographical production in post-1962 Yemen, and reflects changes at the heart of Yemeni society and power relations brought about by the revolution and republicanism.

Nonetheless, ethnographic biographies of Yemenis remain extremely rare, although the genre has recently received more attention.⁶² To date the only monograph-length ethnographic biography is Gabriele vom Bruck’s *Mirrored Loss: A Yemeni Woman’s Life Story*.⁶³ This ethnographic biography tells the life story of Amat al-Laṭīf al-Wazīr, the daughter of ‘Abdallāh al-Wazīr, who was the mastermind behind the failed 1948 attempt at Constitutional Revolution that led to the overthrow and assassination of Imam Yaḥyā, then ruler of Yemen.

55 Dammāj 2000a; and Dammāj 2000b.

56 Hamadānī 2016.

57 Qaddāl 1997.

58 Kafah, ‘Amihud, and Giyat 2001.

59 Al-Salamī and Hoots 2003.

60 Ḥamīd al-Dīn 2008.

61 Khadija al-Salamī came from a modest background and married into a wealthy American family. Taqīyya Ḥamīd al-Dīn was a daughter of Imam Yaḥyā. Fāṭima Abū Rās hailed from a renowned shaykhly lineage from al-Jawf and married into the al-Wazīr clan, who were sayyids.

62 See Varisco 2021, Heiss 2022, Mahoney 2022, focusing on people in pre-revolutionary Yemen.

63 Bruck 2018.

ʿAbdallāh al-Wazīr held the position of Imam for about a month before he was disempowered by Yaḥyā's son Aḥmad and executed, along with other members of the al-Wazīr family and their allies. The events of 1948, as well as those of the following years and decades, are narrated by his daughter Amat al-Laṭīf. In conversation with vom Bruck she reviews the catastrophic effects cast by the aborted Constitutional Revolution on her private life and family in Yemen and, later, in foreign exile. Throughout her life, Amat al-Laṭīf's experiences were emotionally tied to the "original catastrophe" of 1948. While following the trajectory of Amat al-Laṭīf's life, vom Bruck provides an immediate, intimate, and unprecedented glimpse into the life of a female member of Yemen's former hereditary elite; this includes her childhood, upbringing, marriage, and family life with the contextual issues of class, gender, and power relations in Yemen's former ruling families. With affection and profound understanding, vom Bruck, as an "ethnographic listener," documents the richness of Amat al-Laṭīf's experiences and life in a space of privilege, crisis, anguish, loss, and new hopes, all against her haunting past.

Andrew Shryock's article-length *The Rise of Nasir al-Nims: A Tribal Commentary on Being and Becoming a Shaykh*⁶⁴ is the only example to date of a reconstruction and ethnographic contextualization of the life story of a tribal individual in Yemen. Using the example of the personal history of Nāṣir al-Nims, a shaykh of the Murād tribe who lived in the first half of the twentieth century in the region of Jūba near Ma'rib, Shryock examines local conceptions of shaykhly authority and the moral values attached to it. This contribution is designed to remedy the paucity of information on the life stories of shaykhs and tribal voices. Shryock argues that although there is a good amount of information about shaykhs and shaykhly lineages scattered in various contributions to the social anthropology of Yemen and the Middle East in general, we lack concrete examples by which to understand and form theories on shaykhdom, since scholars usually take "programmatic stands."⁶⁵ Hence, whilst the analytical objectives are clarified, the objects analysed – i.e., the tribespeople themselves and how they talk about themselves in their own voices and terms – remain noticeably absent. Shryock's ethnographically informed analysis of the life story of Nāṣir al-Nims, as narrated by one of Nāṣir's grandsons, enables him to extrapolate certain common features of shaykhly authority: superior persuasion skills, assertiveness, a policy of strategic marriage, the ability to manipulate conflicts and capitalize on disputes, and the ability to acquire wealth and

64 Shryock 1990.

65 Shryock 1990: 155.

transform it into influence. By comparing these characteristics of Nāṣir al-Nims with those of other shaykhs in and beyond Yemen, Shryock demonstrates that, beyond this individual case, these principles are relevant to shaykhdom in tribal societies throughout the Middle East.

A social biography usually claims a certain representativeness, that is, it extrapolates something general from the individual. The biographer's challenge and epistemological burden lie in approaching the biography with a careful consideration of whether and how the individual subject of a life story can be related to the supra-individual and the general; that is, is it possible to generate anthropological (or historical) knowledge through a biographical approach. Individual memory is "knowledge with an identity-index."⁶⁶ The personal narrative never records "wie es eigentlich gewesen" ("how it has actually been" – Leopold von Ranke's famous but by now hackneyed phrase),⁶⁷ but rather how a specific person experienced it and what they then made of it. The question of arriving at general "truths" through a biographical approach also pertains to Mujaḥid's narrative. Naturally we cannot assume that what Mujaḥid's memory has preserved is exactly what happened, and his narrative can only produce a partisan account of the recent history of Yemen. Certainly the way he perceived events helps us to understand the local setting in highland Yemen and to reconstruct certain traits of tribe-state relations and Ṣāliḥ's approaches vis-à-vis the tribes. Mujaḥid's narrative cannot provide indisputable facts (as there are few undisputed facts in history), it can merely present the events as he perceived them, experienced them, and then reflected them in a specific tribal and family setting.

With this epistemological problem in mind, throughout the process of writing I attempted to contextualize Mujaḥid's life story with wider national issues, to relate his development and his subjective thinking and acting to the socio-political forces and tendencies of his time, and show the intersection of tribe and state in a way that neither can be seen in isolation from the other. For the political context in Mujaḥid's life comes to the fore as prominently as it does in Alon's *The Shaykh of Shaykhs*, albeit Mithqāl al-Fāyiz's position in the political framework of Jordan is very different from that of Mujaḥid in Yemen, and Mithqāl's life is better documented in historical and archival sources than Mujaḥid's is. However, and similar to Mithqāl's case, the trajectory of Mujaḥid's life and his agency can only be made intelligible when seen against the dense pattern of regime politics that often conditioned them. Therefore, it was

66 Assmann 2008: 114.

67 Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) is generally regarded as the founder of modern Western history, even if his assumptions are no longer universally shared by historians.

necessary to constantly triangulate Mujāhid's life story and Yemen's wider ethnographic, historical, and political records of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This triangulation is an attempt to give history and context to Mujāhid's narrative. It does not aim to make his account "truer." After all, what would it mean to "confirm" his account? The scholarly works are largely concerned with national issues and silent about events at the local level; one only finds snippets here and there in equally subjective and selective accounts, such as the autobiographies of Sinān Abū Laḥūm and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar.

In writing the present book, I faced a further methodological constraint, namely, the possibility or impossibility of participant observation. One of the most important methodological tools of anthropologists is participant observation, which provides a powerful referent to better situate the talk of informants and arrive at what Geertz called "thick description."⁶⁸ I concur with Daniel Varisco, who recently renewed the claim of social anthropology that personal encounter and fieldwork are essential to an understanding of the setting in which one is immersed. Further, the ethnographic experience of "being there" and the bottom-up approach offer a unique lens for defining and refining our understanding of the complexity of the local setting in which our ethnography takes place.⁶⁹ Regrettably, throughout the work on this book, Yemen was in a downward spiral that appears to be bottomless, and which rendered fieldwork in Yemen, for me at least, impossible. Mujāhid faced a similar fate, for he had been in exile since 2006 and resided in countries that proved similarly inaccessible to me, notably Somaliland. Thus, circumstances forced us to resort to digital communication via WhatsApp, Telegram, and the like, and my research was largely limited to the means and tools of long-distance approach and digital anthropology.⁷⁰ This type of communication also had its advantages: it meant that our conversations were utterly private and stress-free and we were able to communicate freely and to engage in open and long-term dialogue without distractions. I was also fortunate to have lived in Yemen for five years (2003–2008) and therefore was well acquainted with the northern highlands. I had been in 'Amrān province, including Sufyān, countless times, and the local experience and knowledge I gained during my long sojourn in Yemen provided me the possibility of contextualizing Mujāhid's narrative with my own experiences and local knowledge and hence applying the "ethnographic imagination," by which anthropologists use their prior knowledge of a region that has

68 Geertz 1973.

69 Varisco 2018.

70 Elsewhere, I have dealt with digital fieldwork in and on Yemen in more analytical detail, see Brandt 2017c.

become inaccessible because of war.⁷¹ In spring 2018, when Mujāhid travelled at short notice (because of a passport issue) from Somaliland to Egypt, I seized the opportunity and flew to Cairo to spend a turbulent week with him there. Thus, the present research largely lacks the dimension of participant observation and immediate “co-operation in dialogue” that can contribute significantly to “render legible another person’s sense of self”⁷² and produce in-depth understanding, as Gabriele vom Bruck reflects so insightfully in *Mirrored Loss* in relation to her research with and about Amat al-Laṭīf al-Wazīr.⁷³

The experience of fieldwork (be it in situ or digital) is famously complicated in both epistemological and ethical terms, and the possibility of arriving at a “thick description” was further diminished by Mujāhid’s request to exclude his private life from the published account. Of course, many research subjects would happily (even enthusiastically) share their private life experiences with anthropologists, as for example Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa*, who frankly revealed the most intimate details of her private life and sexuality. By contrast, I agreed with Mujāhid to this exclusion as much as possible: he offered me the story of his shaykhdom and his struggle against the Ṣāliḥ regime, but *not* the story of his private life. It is true that Mujāhid often spoke privately about his family, and over the years I also came to know many family members: wives, sisters, children, and grandchildren, all of whom he loved passionately (the deaths of his sons, ‘Adnān in winter 2021 and Sufyān in spring 2022, triggered a particularly dark emotional spell). However, I never used these contacts to enquire about him or question his narrative. It was clear that the book records his subjective life story and does not claim to present objective and indisputable truths. I confess, however, that these restrictions caused me some distress, as I was aware that the inclusion of female views would have enriched the account; moreover, female perspectives are dramatically under-represented in scholarship on Yemen, and reviewers and readers were sure to criticize me for presenting this undiluted masculine view. And rightly so, because looking at family life and women’s lives would have produced a more holistic and probably different picture.⁷⁴ Due to its concentration on a single person, this book also lacks the polyphony and enlightening twists in perspective that characterize, for example, Oscar Lewis’ *The Children of Sánchez*.

71 Robben 2010.

72 Marcus 1998: 113.

73 Bruck 2018: 14–18.

74 Nadwa al-Dawsari’s highly interesting report (2014) on women’s agency in conflict mediation in al-Jawf is an example of the inclusion of female views and voices.

The chapters are organized around a chronological framework presenting Mujaḥid's life story in its historical course, not in the order in which we discussed them. In the course of our collaboration, we went through his life story several times. For the first time "in one go," when he conveyed to me its main elements in a tour de force that lasted several days. After some pondering about the meaning of all of it – as I first had to recognize the leitmotiv, and determine what holds it together at its core – I sent him the draft structure and content for the planned biography to obtain his informed consent for the project. In the following years we revisited the main elements over and over again and took them as starting points to venture into the details. It became clear that his memories consisted of different categories: events and experiences that had already been told so many times that their narration seemed formalized and well rehearsed, such as the "evil year" of 1987 and the murder of his father in Sanaa, the perceived marginalization of the Sufyān and the Bakīl tribes, some sequences of the revenge process, his participation in the tribal conferences in the early 1990s, and the Talāḥum project. The narration of these events, which had a certain propagandistic quality for his life project, was often similar down to the very wording. Here the past had already become an imaginary museum in which things stood immovably in fixed places. It became more interesting when I began to ask for details (I had no plan for this, it was spontaneous and intuitive) concerning his subjective experiences, the peculiar atmosphere of a time, and the details of an event. Here long buried fragments of memory emerged that had not been told for a long time, if ever before; their recollection did not follow any pre-established structure and thus had a more spontaneous, immediate, emotionally charged quality. These include episodes from his childhood, for example his time as a hostage in the Qishla in al-Ḥarf; the day of his father's funeral in Sufyān; his experiences in the siege of Aden during the 1994 civil war – memories that marked experiences of vulnerability, defeat, and loss, which he only hesitantly revealed and which triggered recognizably ambivalent emotions. On one such occasion, when he felt positively bothered by my questions, he confessed that "going back in memory and revisit[ing] these events [that took place] decades ago involves strong mental stress and means digging up aches and sorrows."

Throughout this process of anthropological life writing I had to deal with the problem of "how to convey comprehensibly the words of another and remain true to their spirit and intention."⁷⁵ As in many other disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, there is also in anthropology a certain bent

75 Zeitlyn 2008: 154.

to “literariness,” and more “literary” approaches have a long history in blurring the boundary between art and science.⁷⁶ I had not encountered this problem in earlier works, but in the present case I became aware that this was a type of material that could not be processed and presented in the same way as, for example, in my ethnography of the *Ṣaʿda* wars (2017). Therefore, from the beginning it was important to “curate” a suspenseful life story: to record, contextualize, present, and make it comprehensible without destroying the flow of the original narrative. It has been argued that writing should be “enjoyable ... not solely in the sense of theoretical argument matching empirical data but also in the sense of giving pleasure in itself.”⁷⁷ Precisely because Mujāhid’s life story was narrowed to his dealings with the political establishment, a kind of suspense arose, a stringent and dynamic course of action as in a classic drama. I experienced writing this as a constant balancing act in which I mediated the tension between the requirements of retelling a suspenseful life story and, at the same time, upheld the standards of anthropological analysis and presentation. The first chapter is a case in point: I introduce the reader to complex issues (topography, tribalism and tribal structures, political history, and tribe-state relations in twentieth-century Yemen) while at the same time I set the stage for the story. The tough task was to make the audience (both scholars and non-specialists) see the argument through vivid, concrete human actions and simultaneously frame the anthropological, historical, and political background in northern Yemen in a way that might be insightful without becoming ponderous and boring.

The problems of writing, voice, and audience accompanied me throughout the writing process. The awareness that the book would be published in Open Access rendered my work a kind of “public anthropology”: In my mind’s eye, Mujāhid, the Sufyān, and the people of Yemen were looking over my shoulder, pushing me to write accessibly and to be acutely aware of possible repercussions resulting from Mujāhid’s biased presentation of some of his contemporaries – this was no easy task, given Yemen’s game of politics, the feuding context underlying Mujāhid’s narrative, and the antagonistic positions he all too often took. One of his motivations for opening up to me was to set the record straight, regardless of whether this might offend others. I was well aware that, given the antagonistic relations between the main figures in this account (Mujāhid Ḥaydar, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ), the narrative at hand may not be accurate or even fair in every respect. Of course

76 This element of “literariness” has aroused both approval and criticism; see the collection of chapters in Clifford and Marcus (eds.) 1986.

77 McGranahan 2020a: 3.

these are issues in all (auto-)biographies, and are inevitable. Tribal history is by nature oppositional: it serves to glorify the narrator's lineage and tribe and therefore works against the versions of rival lineages, tribes, or groups. Hence it often contains details that others consider incriminating or offensive, and the fear of the repercussions of publishing controversial and partisan tribal accounts may often mean the publication of tribal histories are never told.⁷⁸ Following a similar line of reasoning, Yemeni politician and national hero Aḥmad Muḥammad Nu'mān has long dismissed all requests to publish his memoirs, justifying his refusal with the argument that in his understanding, "memoirs are a kind of misguidance, slander, tyranny, showmanship and self-promotion, offending the dead and hurting the feelings of those who belong to them among the living."⁷⁹

I do not consider the result a full biography, but rather the reconstruction of a certain aspect of Mujaḥid's life: his time as the shaykh of the Sufyān tribe and his resistance to the Ṣāliḥ regime. With the material and means at hand, I could not attempt or achieve more. In his biography of Prussian king Frederick II, Johannes Kunisch writes that every biography ultimately remains "the silhouette of an imagination, based on facts, texts, and concrete evidence."⁸⁰ Translated into anthropology, David Zeitlyn introduces the idea of the "anthropological silhouette": a way of approaching a life history that is "less complete than a biography, and partial, but demonstrably based on an individual, and honest about its limitations and incompleteness."⁸¹ Likewise, this biographical account can only approach its protagonist and offer possible avenues of exploring and explaining idiosyncrasies of a portion of his person and his life.

4 Storyline Synopsis

Bayt Ḥaydar is one of the two principal shaykhly families of the Sufyān tribe in 'Amrān province; its importance derives from the strategic location of their tribal segment, which controls a critical section of the road connecting northern Yemen's power centres of Sanaa and Ṣa'da: the narrow gap of al-Mudarrij. Historical documents in the family's possession show the timeless significance

78 Shryock 1997: 262–310.

79 As he wrote in a letter preserved and published by his son Muṣṭafā, see Nu'mān 2018.

80 „Es ist die Vorstellung des Historikers, der Schattenriß einer auf Fakten, Texte und den konkreten Augenschein gestützten Imagination, die hier vermittelt werden kann," see Kunisch 2009: 8.

81 Zeitlyn 2008: 154, 168.

of *bayt* Ḥaydar to Yemen's rulers in their endeavours to establish their hold on highland Yemen.

The Sufyān are a member tribe of the confederation of Bakīl, whose territories – together with those of the sister confederation of Ḥāshid – make up a large part of central and eastern highland Yemen. *Bayt* Ḥaydar of Sufyān (Bakīl) is embroiled in a historical competition for influence and importance with *bayt* al-Aḥmar of the neighbouring al-ʿUṣaymāt tribe of the Ḥāshid confederation, with whom the Sufyān share a contested common border in Wādī Ḥabṭāʾ, a rivalry that continues to force both families and their tribes into diametrically opposed political positions. When ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar attained national importance in the nascent republic during the 1962 revolution and the ensuing civil war, his rival Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Mujāhid's father) first allied himself with the royalists, then with al-Aḥmar's nemesis President Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, and finally, after al-Ḥamdī's assassination in 1977 and ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh Ṣāliḥ's assumption of power in 1978, with the National Democratic Front (NDF) sponsored by the Marxist southern Yemeni sister state, the PDRY. During the so-called War of the Central Areas (*ḥarb al-Manāṭiq al-Wuṣṭā*), *bayt* Ḥaydar, in collaboration with the regime in Aden, tried to destabilize the young northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) from within.

During Ṣāliḥ's reign, the rivalry between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar continued to play out in the political framework of the YAR. Whereas ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar entered into a close and profitable, yet not untroubled, alliance with President Ṣāliḥ, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his sons continued to strengthen relations with the PDRY, and by this they increasingly attained the status of outsiders and pariahs in the political system of the YAR. While Aḥmad Ḥaydar's consistent political opposition and refusal to enter into a patronage relationship with the increasingly corrupt and oppressive Ṣāliḥ regime in Sanaa reinforced his reputation among the tribes, ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar's cooperation with the regime and the rapacious trading activities of his sons met with criticism among many tribes, for in the moral imagination of the tribes the "resistance history" of *bayt* Ḥaydar is considered nobler and more honourable than the "money and trading history" of *bayt* al-Aḥmar. The age-old tribal value system of "black" vs. "white" frames a dispute over the concept of tribal leadership, in which the rivalry between the two families is an allegory for the struggle between "tradition" and "modernity" in tribal Yemen.

With the denouement of the War of the Central Areas in the early 1980s, the Ṣāliḥ regime strived to extend its influence into the still semi-independent northern tribal redoubts. In Sufyān, the rejectionist attitude of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, his political and military harassment, his violent rejection of Sunni Islamism propagated by ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar, and his ability to disrupt the traffic in

northern highland Yemen at will, remain a thorn in the side of the regime. In 1981, the conflict between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar entered a new stage when the three sons of Aḥmad Ḥaydar were murdered in rapid succession, and, in 1987, when Aḥmad Ḥaydar himself was assassinated. These murders triggered violent conflict and acts of revenge throughout highland Yemen.

After the death of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and three of his sons, the Sufyān tribe elected his fourteen-year-old son Mujāhid as his successor; he was instantly drawn into the chain reactions of blood vengeance. Meanwhile, in the capital, President Ṣāliḥ advanced the negotiations for unification with the PDRY while at the same time trying to keep his domestic political rivals, including ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, in check. For this purpose, Ṣāliḥ approached Mujāhid Ḥaydar and attempted to include him in his patronage networks, in an effort to harness and steer the retributive thrust of the young shaykh and his tribe for his own purposes. Yet Ṣāliḥ’s plan to lay the foundations for a relationship of patronage and dependency between him and Mujāhid Ḥaydar ended in failure. A period of instability followed, one characterized by tribal unrest and insurrection; conflicts that continued to sour relations between Sanaa and the Sufyān beyond the end of the YAR.

In 1990, the unification of the YAR and PDRY ushered in a fierce competition for leadership and political hegemony between Ṣāliḥ and his southern rivals from among the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), with whom Ṣāliḥ entered into a precarious power-sharing agreement. On the local level, too, the establishment of united Yemen’s multiparty system opened up an entire new field of competition and passionate struggle that became more acrimonious in Sufyān than anywhere else in highland Yemen. As the process of political alienation and embitterment between Sanaa and Aden continued, Mujāhid Ḥaydar revived the leftist axis between the Sufyān and Aden from YAR days and allied himself with southern President ‘Alī Ṣālim al-Biḍ against Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. In the series of tribal conferences and gatherings that took place between 1990 and 1994, Mujāhid Ḥaydar agitated for the YSP. In 1994, the complex and particularly vicious constellations between tribes, state, and (northern and southern) army units stationed in Sufyān triggered the very first battles of the civil war in which Mujāhid Ḥaydar and his tribe supported the southern army. After the defeat of the South, mounting pressure from Sanaa forced Mujāhid Ḥaydar into exile. For a while, he supported the Yemeni MAWJ opposition movement from Saudi Arabia, then he left for Syria.

His return from Syria to Yemen in 2004 coincided with the eruption of the Ḥūthī conflict in Ṣa‘da, a conflict that soon dragged large areas of Yemen into its vortex. The Ḥūthī conflict again lent supreme importance to the highway between Sanaa and Ṣa‘da. Since Mujāhid Ḥaydar and his tribe control its most

vulnerable section, all parties to the conflict (Ḥūthīs, Ṣāliḥ, General ‘Alī Muḥsin) vied for his support. As Mujāhid and his tribe were caught between the parties to the conflict, all of whom he continues to loathe and deeply despise, he saw that the only way out for himself and his tribe was for him to leave Yemen again in 2006, this time for good. In 2014, during Mujāhid’s absence, the Sufyān eventually entered into an alliance of purpose with the Ḥūthī forces, enabling them to follow through with a good part of their retributive agenda against *bayt* al-Aḥmar. Under cover of Ḥūthī expansions in ‘Amrān, the Sufyān succeeded in exacting revenge by seizing the ancestral home base of *bayt* al-Aḥmar near Khamir and demolishing it. This highly visible and – for the al-Aḥmar family – utterly humiliating event significantly contributed to the weakening of *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the dispersal of its members.

Childhood in Obscurity (1974–1981)

فَأَنَّ الدَّوْلَةَ لَا تَسْتَطِيعُ تَأْمِينَ الطَّرِيقَاتِ بِدُونِ تَعَاوُنِكُمْ

for the state cannot secure the roads without your cooperation

(from the letter of an imam to *bayt* Ḥaydar)



In retrospect, and if one looks at the trajectory of his life, our protagonist Mujāhid Ḥaydar seems very much the product of a specific environment and time, both of which left their mark on his being, and traces of this upbringing – the good and the bad – remained visible in him for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, approaching him from the point of view of his origins and the experiences of his childhood was fraught with difficulties. In our lengthy conversations, spanning a period of ten years, I noted that he would seldom recall, out of unwillingness or inability, the time of his childhood and adolescence. With a few exceptions that stood out rather monolithically, he seemed to have no memories of that time, or did not consider them relevant, or was unwilling to share them. The years these memories deal with, after all, were many decades back, and when we tried to dig them up in the end they yielded no more than a few disconnected ruins: Memories of the village and his parental home, the introduction into tribal culture by his family, the episodes of early displacement, and the ever recurring narrative of peril and suffering, coupled with a sense of superiority and defiant pride. For generations, these “transcripts” (the term coined by Scott) seemed to be handed down by his family and shaped his world view from his earliest youth. The time of his childhood thus appears obscure in several respects: In terms of memory, that time yielded no more than fragments; in terms of upbringing, he was introduced into the lives of adults early on and tried to emulate them. And it was obscure in a physical sense as well, since he spent several years of this short period of his life in captivity as a government hostage, then with a foster family in al-Jawf, hidden away from his original home.

Indeed, Mujāhid’s childhood was filled with unusual times. Reconstructing the political framework of the 1970s and early 1980s means revisiting a time of

vicissitudes and reversals of fortunes, in which the political arena that came into being provided the stage of Mujāhid's struggles as an adult, and in which he remained imprisoned for almost the whole of his life. In Sufyān, at the heart of these power struggles were a territorial conflict and an ancient rivalry between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the principal shaykhly family of the neighbouring al-ʿUṣaymāt tribe, and likewise an immensely influential family in highland Yemen. This chapter shows how in the 1960s, during the revolution and the ensuing civil war that led to the overthrow of the last imam and the formation of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), the ancient rivalry between these two tribal families translated into political competition that forced them into opposing political camps. The change in the political system of the 1960s was a brutal and fateful period in the destiny of northern Yemen, and the dramatic succession of events there was by no means resolved with the national reconciliation (*al-muṣāliḥa al-waṭaniyya*) in 1970. Born in 1974 into the era of President Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, Mujāhid was still an infant when, in 1977, hostilities broke out anew, this time in an acrimonious fight over the YAR's future orientation and balance of power that destabilized Sufyān almost as much and as fiercely as the 1960s civil war did. Mujāhid was only four years old when, in 1978, ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh Ṣāliḥ came to power amidst this turmoil. Ultimately, Ṣāliḥ acceded to power and attempted to stabilize the regime, and ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar managed to cement his predominant position in national politics.

The antagonism between these two influential families stood out among the countless petty feuds in highland Yemen, and President Ṣāliḥ, whose governing style relied on the exploitation of crises and conflicts among his opponents and rivals, tried to use this potential enmity between the families to secure his grip on power. The period of Mujāhid's childhood covered in this chapter thus witnesses the evolution of the proto-form of Ṣāliḥ's style of governance, as the president began to play with growing mastery his double game of manipulation and coercion in an effort to outmanoeuvre and checkmate his foes (an approach that ultimately accelerated his fall). The tenacious blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, whose trajectory is the subject of subsequent chapters of this book, became, in part, a consequence of this policy.

1 The Topography of Power

Once you pass Khaywān and cross Jabal Aswad ridge, the vastness really begins. In Sanaa and southern ʿAmrān you often find yourself moving through landscapes bearing signs of domestication: sprawling settlements, bustling street

markets, irrigated farmlands, terraced mountainsides. But once you pass Jabal Aswad and strike out to al-Ḥarf and the barren highland of al-ʿAmashiyya, you become aware of a change in the heart of things: aware of the wind sweeping over wastelands, steppe, rockscapes of Jurassic limestone, flood basalt and deserts of dark scree, utterly spoilt by the sun. Mirages and whirlwinds suddenly swallow parts of the landscape, and wherever you turn the horizon recedes. You have entered Sufyān.

In Sufyān, lengthy spaces lie between one village and the next. The architecture changes from stone to mud. Small settlements cluster on windswept rocks, or hide in the hollows of the valleys, punctuated with *Acacia* and *ʿilb* trees. Agriculture is sporadic and largely limited to the cultivation of *dhurra* and *qāt*. Before the advent of artificial irrigation in the 1970s, crops were irregular, and the lean years were very lean indeed and left no margin for thrift.¹ In Sufyān, one sees more flocks of sheep and black goats than further south. The area is rich in wildlife. In the highlands are rabbits, foxes, mountain wolves, and the rock hyrax (*wabr*). The jagged twin peaks of Sufyān's signature mountain Jabal Maflūq are said to be populated by the ibex, and herds of gazelles live in its shadows. Hunters still chase the Arabian leopard (*nimr*), and among the peasants of the enormous wastelands, the legend of Sufyān's mythical lion (*asad al-ʿAmashiyya*) lives on.

Against the more fertile and greener parts of ʿAmrān province, Sufyān lies roughly in the form of a large sickle. To the far north-west, the tip of the sickle touches the mountains of Ḥajja province. To the north, Sufyān's barren rock-cape al-ʿAmashiyya extends towards the southern rim of the Ṣaʿda basin. To the east, the Baraṭ plateau towers above Sufyān's steppe landscape of Sawādān. To the south-east, Sufyān descends towards the depression of al-Jawf. The southern tip of the sickle reaches as far as Sanaa governorate. In terms of size, Sufyān makes up one third of ʿAmrān province.² It is the largest territory of a northern tribe, apart from the largely uninhabited desert realm of the Dhū Ḥusayn in al-Jawf, with whom the Sufyān share common, albeit remote, Bedouin roots.³ In

1 In the history of Yemen, the arid plateaux of the northern highlands were ravaged by famine from time to time. On his journey through Arḥab in the 1960s, Serjeant (1987) observed signs of a local custom, according to which people suffering from famine (i.e., when they saw that escape from death was impossible) would lock the doors of their houses from the inside and remain there until they died. This was considered an "honourable death."

2 ʿAmrān province at present covers 2,734 square kilometres.

3 Since the beginning of the Common Era, many tribes of Bakīl, especially those in al-Jawf and its environs, have been frequently subjected to penetration by Arab Bedouin tribes from further north, see Robin 1991. Their geographic location near the desert distinguishes the tribes

terms of topography and descent, Sufyān is one of the anterooms to the Rub' al-Khālī (the Empty Quarter), and it is here that the last spurs of the desert touch the fertile highlands of Yemen.

Carsten Niebuhr's seventeenth-century map of Yemen depicts Sufyān and al-ʿAmashiyya – *Amerschīa desertum* in his map – as an empty space beyond the northern end of Yemen: a large blank spot both separating and connecting central highland Yemen with the Ṣa'da area, the primordial cell and spiritual centre of Zaydism and the Zaydi imams, and still further north, ʿAsīr and Ḥijāz in Saudi Arabia. Since time immemorial, the main transit route between these power centres runs through Sufyān. The road leading via Sufyān from Sanaa to Ṣa'da is the southernmost section of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route, the main corridor connecting Yemen with ʿAsīr and Ḥijāz; it has been travelled by pilgrims, merchants, conquerors, and armies since pre-Islamic times. Whereas the network of small roads, paths, and trails criss-crossing the Yemeni highlands always offered many alternatives and options for detours, the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route retained its singular importance as the main direct link connecting Sanaa with Ḥijāz.⁴

Rulers have been unanimous in their appraisal of Sufyān's strategic location and this road. In Islamic Yemen, Sufyān was the main corridor for the Zaydi imams trying to extend their dominion beyond their ancestral home base of Ṣa'da and to establish control over territories further south. During the 1960s civil war between royalists and republicans, which led to the deposition of the last Zaydi imam Muḥammad al-Badr Ḥamīd al-Dīn and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), Sufyān remained hotly contested, when the royalists (financed by the Saudis and the British) waged a guerrilla campaign against the republicans, who fought alongside the Egyptian army.⁵ The royalists' most effective actions were aimed at disturbing the enemy's lines of communication, and the Egyptian army, with its heavy gear and navigating almost without maps, was absolutely dependent on the road. Sufyān remained

of Bakīl from those of Ḥāshid and has historically led to the Bakīl's partial "bedouinization," see Caskel 1966: vol. 2: 47.

- 4 On the history and significance of this road, see al-Thenayian 1996. The road is also known as the "Road of the Elephant" (*darb al-fīl*) after the unsuccessful military campaign of Abraha, the Abyssinian viceroy in Yemen, in ca. 570 CE, who took with him a number of war elephants on this road, see Beeston 1960.
- 5 Dresch 1989: 244–245. On the 1960s civil war, as seen from different vantage points, see al-Shahārī 1966; O'Ballance 1971; Juzaylān 1977; al-Ḥadīdī 1984; Zabārah 1984; Bādīb 1990; Muṭahhar 1990; al-Muqrimī 1991; Aḥmad 1992; Dresch 2000: 89–199; Witty 2001; and Orkaby 2017. The personal memoirs of ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar (2008: 79–200) and Sinān Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 2: 21–358 are also rich testimonies to the civil war.

a hotbed of royalist activity, and throughout the civil war the royalists blocked the road and forced the republicans to resort to smuggling routes via eastern Ḥajja province to western Banī ‘Uwayr and from there to the city of Ṣa‘da and/or supply their bases further north by air.⁶ In 1968, when Prince ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan Ḥamīd al-Dīn advanced on Sanaa from Ṣa‘da through Sufyān’s administrative centre al-Ḥarf, he supposedly said, “Be sure, if we can pass al-Ḥarf and the Black Mountain [Jabal Aswad], then victory is ours.”⁷ Again, during the Ṣa‘da wars (2004–2010) between the republican government and the Zaydi revivalist movement called Anṣār Allāh or “Ḥūthīs,” local sources referred to Sufyān as “the key that unlocks the two halves of Yemen,” “the strap that holds Ṣa‘da and Sanaa together,” and “the ruling gate governing the province of Ṣa‘da,” without whose control neither party to the conflict could hold onto the northern highlands.⁸ Although these sources refer to the conflicts of the early twenty-first century, they are accurate descriptions of roughly 1,000 years of Sufyānī history.

There are fortresses and retreats in highland Yemen, such as the famous mountain strongholds in Shahāra and Kawkabān, and the natural caves of Qāra and Maṭra. These symbols of resistance are located off the main routes and serving as refuges for the northern leaders in times of war.⁹ And there are places whose control essentially enables one to command entire areas and vital routes of transport: Manākha, for example, towers over the street from Sanaa to al-Ḥudayda, northern Yemen’s principal Red Sea port; the mountain pass Naqīl al-Farḍa is the gate to Ma‘rib; and – most important – the massive fortress of Ḥajja overlooks large swathes of the highlands and the Tihāma coastal plain and commands the northernmost road connection which runs via ‘Amrān city from Sanaa to the Red Sea.

Likewise, Sufyān is located at a crossroads. Situated between two power centres, it always played a key role in governing highland Yemen.¹⁰ This road,

6 Al-Ḥadīdī 1984: 83–85.

7 Brandt 2013: 123.

8 These descriptions were used by local sources during the research for my article on “Sufyān’s Hybrid War” (2013) and my book (2017a) on the role of the highland tribes in Yemen’s Ḥūthī conflict.

9 Qāra and Maṭra are cavernous areas in Ṣa‘da province; Qāra was a royalist headquarters in the 1960s civil war; and Maṭra served as a refuge for Ḥūthī leaders during the Ṣa‘da wars of 2004–10, see Brandt 2017a: 185–186. On the historical importance of Shahāra and Kawkabān, see Wilson 1982 and Wilson 1989: 206 and 289.

10 See also discussions by Dostal (1968–69: 247) and Gingrich (1993) on the relationship between large state centres and local cultures in the Middle East. Both emphasize the importance of the specific location of a local group or tribe in the overall context of power and space. Gingrich (1993: 263–267) shows that a situation similar to that in Sufyān

linking Sanaa and Ṣa'da, leads through more or less open terrain. At only one place, in Sufyān about 30 km north of al-Ḥarf, the road makes a sharp turn and passes through a rugged, defensible ridge of flood basalt. At this very place the road also crosses two bridges spanning two *wādīs* that come from al-'Amashiyya and join near this place to form Wādī Sinām, whose waters further to the east drain into Wādī Madhāb, which, even further, reaches the heart of al-Jawf. Further north from this natural bottleneck, the street reaches out to the expanse of al-'Amashiyya. The road is narrow, and the large boulders are positioned such that any person or vehicle coming up from either side must pass beneath and between them. This natural chokepoint is called al-Mudarrij, translated as "stairs." Al-Mudarrij is the narrowest section of this road, a dangerous area that is difficult to observe and that has no bypass. It is a strategic site by virtue of the natural mountainous fortifications that make it ideal for roadblocks and ambushes. The natural conditions in al-Mudarrij make it possible for a handful of people to paralyze almost all of the traffic between central Yemen and the north.

Sufyān is the name of both the territory and the tribe that dwells in it. The tribe of Sufyān is divided into two moieties – Ṣubāra and Ruhm – that further subdivide into a number of tribal segments. Each of these segments is headed by a shaykh: a chieftain or headman. The shaykh performs important tasks for the benefit of his community, among them, administering and representing its interests vis-à-vis other tribes and the government, and – most central – solving problems, mediating, and arbitrating in accordance with tribal customary law (*ʿurf*).¹¹ The position of the shaykh is usually inherited in the wider lineage;

also exists in Wā'ilah, an area in north-eastern Yemen near Najrān, where the homonymous tribe controls the main road that connects Najrān with Ṣa'da and thus controls the main trade and smuggling routes between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Wā'ilah's power was particularly evident during the so-called "Wā'ilah roadblock" (*qaṭā' Wā'ilah*), which resulted in a series of battles and almost led to civil war, see also Dresch 1989: 381. Whereas the Wā'ilah tribe plays a key role in transnational trade and smuggling, the position of the Sufyān is significant for governing highland Yemen.

- 11 The role of shaykhs in the tribal societies of Yemen is well documented, both by Yemeni scholars and foreign anthropologists. See for example Abū Ghānim 1985: 191–230; Dresch 1984a; 1989: 97–106; al-'Alimi 1988: 77–82; Gingrich 1989: 105–136; al-Ẓāhiri 1996: 104–115; Weir 2007: 95–120; and Brandt 2014a. The term *shaykh* can denote a tribal rank or a position of religious leadership, as expressed in the terms *shaykh al-qabīla* (tribal leader) and *shaykh al-dīn* (Islamic scholar). Sometimes a shaykh's close agnates are also referred to as shaykh. The legal situation in Yemen is characterized by the coexistence of three legal systems: customary law (*ʿurf*), Islamic law (*sharī'a*), and state law. In highland Yemen, *ʿurf* and *sharī'a* are in many, but not all ways, complementary. The importance of *ʿurf* is mainly due to the fact that it contains detailed provisions regarding issues of local concern, such as agriculture, trade, animal husbandry, markets, grazing and water rights, on which

shaykhs are hierarchically ranked, depending on their personal skills, reputation, and influence.¹² The narrow pass of al-Mudarrīj and the surrounding villages are the home area of the Ḥaydar family – locally referred to as *bayt* Ḥaydar¹³ – of Dhū Aḥmad segment of Ruhm moiety, one of the two principal shaykhly lineages of the tribe of Sufyān. The other is *bayt* Ḥubaysh, the family of the principal shaykhs of Ṣubāra moiety.¹⁴ Ibn Ḥaydar and Ibn Ḥubaysh, as the respective incumbents are called, have been competing for the position of the senior shaykh of the whole tribe of Sufyān for centuries.¹⁵ In Sufyān's volatile history, sometimes one family and sometimes the other was considered supreme.

Sufyān is one of the member tribes of the confederation of Bakīl, whose territories – together with those of its sister confederation of Ḥāshid and the Khawlān b. ʿĀmir confederation in western Ṣaʿda province – make up most of highland Yemen.¹⁶ Due to the central location and the shape of their territory, reminiscent of a vast sickle, the Sufyān have longer external borders with other tribes of Bakīl, Ḥāshid, and Khawlān b. ʿĀmir than any other tribe. To

shariʿa law is unspecific or silent, see al-ʿAlīmī 1988; Gingrich 1989: 117–123; Dresch 2006; Weir 2007: 145–146; and Ṣayyād 2014. As a result of the codification process from the 1970s onwards, today Yemeni state law incorporates elements from *shariʿa* and *ʿurf*, excerpts from Egyptian and other Arab laws, and international principles, see al-Zwaini 2012.

12 On different concepts and approaches to the hierarchization and ranking of shaykhs among the confederations of Bakīl, Ḥāshid, and Khawlān b. ʿĀmir, see Brandt 2014a: 98–105.

13 The term *bayt* (house) refers to a household or extended family and is used in conjunction with the name of one of its members' common forebears. In the case of *bayt* Ḥaydar, the name Ḥaydar pertains to a long-deceased ancestor. On the usage of the term *bayt* in highland Yemen, see Weir 2007: 78 and Varisco 2017: 233–234, 237.

14 *Bayt* Ḥubaysh is equally prominent in highland Yemen; members of the Ḥubaysh lineage are frequently mentioned in Zabārah's works on the history of Yemen (1941, 1958), see Dresch 1989: 202–204, 207, 210–211.

15 The longevity of shaykhly lineages and the principle of dynastic succession are reflected in references to eponymous ancestors through the use of the affix *ibn* or *bin* (b. = son of). Upon inauguration, each newly elected office holder of a long-standing shaykhly lineage receives this affix – e.g., Ibn Ḥaydar, Ibn Ḥubaysh, Ibn al-Aḥmar, etc. – that identifies him as the agnate of the historical founder of the particular shaykhly lineage. The title remains his “term of address” and “term of reference” throughout his tenure, and under this common name, all shaykhs of the same lineage operate and have done so in some cases for over a thousand years. Thus, the official names of the shaykhs from long-standing shaykhly lineages is a genealogical designation that declares the agnatic legitimacy of its bearer; see Gingrich 1989: 134.

16 The tribes of highland Yemen (and elsewhere) organize themselves into confederations: associations of independent tribes of a putative common descent that occasionally act together outwardly, but retain their sovereignty. In Arabic, there is no equivalent to the term “confederation,” Yemenis just refer to “the tribes of Bakīl” (*qabāʾil Bakīl*).

the east, Sufyān shares borders with Dhū Ḥusayn and Banī Nawf of Bakīl in al-Jawf province. To the north, Sufyān borders Dhū Muḥammad, Āl Sālim, and Āl ‘Ammār of Bakīl plus Banī ‘Uwayr of Saḥār of Khawlān b. ‘Āmir. Al-‘Abīsa lies to the west, along with al-‘Uṣaymāt, Dhū Khayrān, al-Ma‘āmira, and Dhū Far‘a of Ḥāshid. To the south, Sufyān shares borders with seven segments of Banī Ṣuraym of Ḥāshid. It also has borders with Khārif of Ḥāshid in Shawāba and Hirrān, and with Arḥab and Nihm of Bakīl to the south.

Sufyān’s relations with the tribes on their outer borders are often uneasy. With many, the Sufyān share a history of conflict, mostly over territorial claims and the location of their common borders. In the moral imagination of the tribes, territory and hence borders hold a special iconic importance, and any infringement of their territories and borders is considered an infringement of their collective tribal honour (*sharaf*), a value of supreme importance in the moral imagination of the tribes.¹⁷ Sufyān’s eternal caution in regard to its vulnerable borders is almost proverbial. Sufyān’s segments have a reputation of fragmenting easily; however, when one segment faces external aggression, the external threat brings a suspension of their internal disputes and the whole of Sufyān rushes to its aid.¹⁸

Sufyān’s most embattled borders are those to the west and south, where Sufyān – itself a member tribe of Bakīl – shares borders with the tribes of Ḥāshid, with whom the Bakīl are embroiled in an ancient competition over influence and predominance in highland Yemen. The tribes of Bakīl regard the Sufyān as their frontier tribe, the vanguard confronting the tribes of Ḥāshid. The territorial conflict between the Sufyān of Bakīl and al-‘Uṣaymāt of Ḥāshid over the course of their common boundary in Wādī Ḥabṭā’ in the area of al-Suwād is one of the most virulent and embattled fault lines between Bakīl and Ḥāshid, in the course of which the Sufyān and al-‘Uṣaymāt came to oppose

17 The maintenance and defence of honour (*sharaf*) holds a special place in the moral value system of the tribes. A tribesman’s honour can be impugned by attacks on any constituent element of his self, with women and landholdings (*ard*) considered the most important. Thus, the protected space on which tribal honour depends is often identified with physical space and territory. Disgrace (*‘ayb*) infringes honour, and according to the code of tribalism any infringement of honour requires amends. The honour of an individual tribesman is simultaneously part of the tribe’s collective honour and therefore can be (though is not always) defended by the entire tribal solidary group, driven by the imperative of *‘aṣabiyya* (i.e., “clannishness” or “cohesive drive against outsiders”); see Levanoni 2016. On the concept of tribal honour see, for example, Serjeant 1977: 227–228; Adra 1982: 142–144, 185–186; Caton 1987: 90–93; Caton 1990: 161–165; Dresch 1989: 38–70; Gingrich 2001; Gingrich 2002: 148–152; and Weir 2007: 49–51.

18 On these obligations of common assistance among the Sufyān, see Dresch 1989: 127–128, 259–261, 350–352.

each other as adversaries, with all the unpleasant consequences this entails. It is not known when the conflict in and for Wādī Ḥabṭā' in al-Suwād began: in fact it dragged on over the centuries, and Sufyān and al-ʿUṣaymāt have fought countless skirmishes and battles over this border, both on the battlefield and in court.¹⁹

To the Sufyān al-ʿUṣaymāt are a powerful adversary. For al-ʿUṣaymāt are not any Ḥāshid tribe, but rather the home tribe of *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the senior shaykhly lineage of the larger Ḥāshid confederation and for centuries an immensely prominent and influential family.²⁰ Starting from the territorial conflict in al-Suwād, and informed by the historical sensitivity between Ḥāshid and Bakil, a rivalry over influence (*nufūdh*) and predominance (*sayṭara*) evolved between the Sufyān and al-ʿUṣaymāt, both spearheaded by their senior shaykhs: Ibn al-Aḥmar of al-ʿUṣaymāt, and Ibn Ḥaydar of Sufyān, with each shaykh representing a tribe that considers the other its hereditary enemy, the opposite pole of an “iron antithesis” (*nuqīdayn ḥadīdayn*), to use Mujaḥid's expression. The source of this conflict was a territorial dispute in al-Suwād, yet over time further rivalries and jealousies became part of the original dispute, which was then translated into political rivalry and continually forced these two families into opposing political camps and positions. Initially dyadic, the situation became multiplex. While it was initially localized, it became a matter of broader concern. As time went by, the rivalries of one family against the other encompassed issues of territory, honour, politics, religion, and hegemony of such complexity that their revision, to paraphrase Dresch, “might unravel ... disputes the length and breadth of tribal Yemen.”²¹

19 During his expedition to Arḥab, Glaser (1884: 170) learned about a territorial conflict between Sufyān and Ḥāshid in Wādī Khaywān in the early 1880s; this led the Ḥāshid to cause a “horrific carnage” among the Sufyān. In his 1884 travel diary Glaser further specifies these events; he writes about a massive raid, “den die Ḥāshid-Araber vor zirka 6 Wochen ins Gebiet der Sufyān gemacht haben, wo sie fürchterlich hausten. Wie mir seinerzeit in ‘Amrān der Shaykh ‘Alī Muthenna al-Qudaymī, der bei jenem Araberzug eine Art Feldherrenrolle spielte, erzählte, hätten sie 3 oder 4 Dörfer den Flammen preisgegeben mitsamt den Einwohnern, Männern, Greisen, Weibern und Kindern. Dieses wird mir nunmehr auch von der angegriffenen Seite (den Bakil) bestätigt. Alle Bakilstämme haben infolge dessen ihre schwebenden Feindseligkeiten eingestellt, um dem Appelle der Sufyān, gemeinsam die Ḥāshid anzugreifen, Folge leisten zu können” (see Dostal 1993: 55). Local sources from among the Sufyān told me that the conflict between al-ʿUṣaymāt and Sufyān was also tried in court sometime during the imamic period (*fī waqt al-imām*), and that a decision was issued in favour of the Sufyān, however, it was not implemented on the ground due to the lack of Ḥāshid cooperation.

20 Dresch 1989: 204–207.

21 Dresch 1995: 48.

It is a well-established fact that Sufyān acts in opposition to al-ʿUṣaymāt, and that in the political history of Yemen Ibn Ḥaydar and Ibn al-Aḥmar always take opposing sides. In this struggle sometimes one family, sometimes the other, gained the upper hand. We find ample evidence for this in the history of twentieth-century Yemen. During the 1948 Constitutional Revolution, Ibn Ḥaydar fought with Imam Aḥmad to recapture Sanaa, while Ḥusayn b. Nāṣir al-Aḥmar (ʿAbdallāh's father) and his tribesmen deliberately lingered behind in ʿAmrān and hence arrived in Sanaa well after the battle was over, leaving some doubt as to which side he had planned to join (the Imam's, he solemnly assured the victors in the aftermath, but since that time, Imam Aḥmad mocked him as "the shaykh who was late").²² In the years that followed, the estrangement between *bayt* al-Aḥmar and Imam Aḥmad intensified, and eventually culminated in the execution of ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar's father and uncle in 1959.²³ In the 1960s civil war between royalists and republicans, Qā'id Ḥaydar and his son Aḥmad (Mujāhid's grandfather and father) initially supported the revolution, yet defected to the royalist camp when ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar rose to prominence among the republicans.²⁴ Sufyān remained a hotbed of royalist activity throughout the war. Qā'id and Aḥmad Ḥaydar and their tribesmen blocked the road, ambushed and shot at convoys, and obliged the Egyptians to supply their military bases further north by air. Ultimately, the Egyptian troops withdrew from Yemen (they were needed in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967), and the Saudis, who had supported the royalist cause, gradually settled their differences with the republicans, who were then victorious. ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar, who had helped to negotiate the rapprochement between the republicans and the Saudis, became an immensely influential member of the republican government and the chief negotiator between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni tribes, assuming the position as a mediator between the Saudis and the tribes that had formerly been held by the royalist shaykhs. In 1970, Aḥmad Ḥaydar (along with many other royalist shaykhs such as Nāji l-Ghādir of Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl and Ḥāmis al-ʿAwjarī of Wā'ilah) refused to participate in

22 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 47–48. The Constitutional Revolution of 1948, led by ʿAbdallāh al-Wazīr, sought to reform the autocratic imamate and led to the assassination of Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn. It collapsed when Yaḥyā's heir, crown prince Aḥmad, recaptured Sanaa with the help of northern tribes, see Stookey 1978: 213–223; al-Wazīr 2003; and al-Mas'ūdī 2006: 328–372. For the personal account of these events by al-Wazīr's daughter, see Bruck 2018.

23 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 71–72. On Imam Aḥmad's orders, Ḥusayn b. Nāṣir al-Aḥmar and his son Ḥamid (ʿAbdallāh's brother) were beheaded at Ḥajja.

24 ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar claims in his memoirs (2008: 93), that the Ḥāshid so dominated the republican side that many equated the revolution with the Ḥāshid tribe.

the national reconciliation with the republic and cooperate with the Saudis, who had abandoned them and whom they regarded as traitors. In search of new allies and financial support, they shifted to the leftist axis and approached the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the YAR's Marxist sister state and nemesis that came into being in the 1960s.²⁵ The underground channels of communication between the Bakīl tribes and the socialists in Aden date back to this time, and remained in effect until the civil war in 1994. In 1972 the Bayḥān massacre, a political intrigue by the YAR government that aimed at severing the Bakīl-Aden ties, came as a shock for these tribes, yet ultimately failed to break up this "leftist" axis.²⁶

The republican heroes among the shaykhs – 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, Mujaḥid Abū Shawārib, Sinān Abū Laḥūm – managed to parlay their surge of power into influential positions in the new YAR government. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's stellar political ascent; he was transformed from the Saudis' antagonist to one of their closest partners. In 1971 he attained further political significance by becoming president of the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shūrā), the YAR's new national legislative body dominated by tribal figures. Al-Aḥmar used the Consultative Council to assert his and his peers' interests: preventing the expansion of government power into the tribal areas, securing the constant flow of state subsidies to the shaykhs, and implementing a pro-Saudi and anti-PDRY foreign policy.²⁷

Aḥmad Ḥaydar, embittered by the posture of events after the national reconciliation in 1970, retired to Sufyān. In the early 1970s, in the ongoing competition between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the latter seemed to have surpassed the former. Indeed, for a time after the end of the civil war, *bayt* al-Aḥmar not only triumphed over *bayt* Ḥaydar, but also exerted extraordinary influence over the YAR's government. In 1974, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar even forced President al-Iryānī to resign when the president tried to rein him in.²⁸ But

25 Dresch (1984b: 170) observed that "during the late 1970s, when the National Democratic Front was [a] major feature of Yemeni affairs, those tribes which in the main expressed sympathy with the Front, and whose members declared themselves Nasserist or socialist, were precisely the tribes which a few years before had been thought staunchly royalist."

26 The Bayḥān massacre of 1972 was a northern political intrigue that led to the murder of 65 members of formerly leading royalist shaykhly families in a tent on PDRY territory; most of them were from the Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl tribe. Among those murdered was the royalist figurehead Nāji l-Ghādir. The massacre triggered the eruption of the 1972 border war between the YAR and PDRY; see Brandt 2019.

27 Koszinowski 1978: 65; Peterson 1982: 105.

28 Al-Iryānī tried to prevent the shaykhs from plundering state funds. Sinān Abū Laḥūm wrote in his memoirs that in 1974 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar sent a letter to al-Iryānī threatening to attack Sanaa if he did not offer his resignation, see Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 2: 470.

this was not the end: shortly thereafter the course of events radically changed direction again when President Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī came to power.

2 In the Throes of State Building (1970s)

One day in 1974, a few months after President Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī ascended to power, a car drove into the courtyard of the Ḥaydar house in the village of Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a near al-Mudarrij. The door opened, and through it emerged Aḥmad Ḥaydar, who welcomed his guest. The visitor was Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib, senior shaykh of Khārif of Ḥāshid, the neighbouring tribe to the south. Although they had led opposing sides in the civil war, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib were close friends, and even the territorial dispute between the Khārif and a segment of the Sufyān, to which Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib's father had fallen victim, did not mar their mutual affection and esteem.²⁹ Their friendship only came to an end four years later, in 1978, when Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib was wounded by a Sufyānī bullet in the battle at Jabal Aswad, and the erstwhile friendship between the two shaykhs was transformed into enmity. But during 1974, they did not foresee such tragic events, and there was no sign of hatred.

It had been some time since anyone had needed him, and Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib's request for his services seemed to Aḥmad Ḥaydar an auspicious sign. The day of Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib's visit coincided with another joyful event: a child was born, and his pleasure at the birth of his fifth son and the visit of his friend was so intense that Aḥmad Ḥaydar resolved to interrupt the series of his sons' first names, all of which began with the signature letter *ḥ* of *ḥayt* Ḥaydar (Ḥaydar, Ḥāmis, Ḥamīd, Ḥasan) and name the newborn after his revered guest: Mujaḥhid.

The reason for Mujaḥhid Abū Shawārib's visit was a little delicate. The stalemate between the government and the shaykhs in Sanaa, spearheaded by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, had recently led to President al-Iryānī's resignation, and in his place Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, the scion of a learned, respected tribal lineage from 'Iyāl Surayḥ, a member tribe of Bakīl, had come to power on 13 June 1974.

On the dominance of the shaykhs in national politics in the era of al-Iryānī, see also Koszinowski 1978; Peterson 1982: 173–175; al-Zāhirī 1996: 148–159; Jallūl 1999: 47–52; and al-'Aynī 2000: 149–214.

29 This happened in imamic times, before the 1962 revolution. On the Khārif version of this territorial dispute and Yaḥyā Abū Shawārib's assassination, see al-Salami and Hoots 2003: 228–230.

As a result, the precarious balance of power in the fledgling YAR was unstable again. The shaykhs in Sanaa were concerned to see that the implementation of al-Ḥamdī's political agenda, the so-called "Corrective Movement of 13 June" (Ḥaraka 13 Yūniyyū al-Taṣḥīḥiyya) that marked the beginning of Yemen's "Third Republic" (*al-jumhūriyya al-thālitha*), amounted to a rigorous reversal of the republic's power relations and a fundamental recalibration of the status quo.³⁰ In terms of foreign policy, al-Ḥamdī's Corrective Movement envisaged curbing Saudi influence and aligning the YAR with the Marxist PDRY, in order to unite the two Yemeni sister states, the so-called *shaṭrayn*. Domestically, al-Ḥamdī (like his predecessor al-Iryānī) regarded the interference of the great shaykhs as the main cause for the YAR's political and economic problems, hence his Corrective Movement was aimed at limiting their influence through administrative reform and by combating corruption, detribalizing the armed forces following the example of the PDRY, and mobilizing the grassroots of the rural populace through so-called Local Development Associations (LDAs) in order to interact directly with the people, without interventions by the tribal leaders.³¹

At the time of Mujāhid Abū Shawārib's visit to Aḥmad Ḥaydar, al-Ḥamdī had already begun to implement his agenda: He had suspended the Republican Council and the constitution and was now moving to remove the tribal heads from the government. In October 1974, Sinān Abū Laḥūm had been dismissed as governor of al-Ḥudayda. And that was just the beginning: in June 1975, a few months after visiting Aḥmad Ḥaydar, al-Ḥamdī also dismissed Mujāhid Abū Shawārib from his post as deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In October 1975, al-Ḥamdī suspended the Consultative Council, thereby also excluding 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar from the government.³² To break the influence of the shaykhs in the army, al-Ḥamdī established the 'Amāliqa ("Giants") Brigade, commanded by his brother, as a strong force free from tribal influence and loyal only to himself.³³ Al-Ḥamdī was charismatic and extremely popular with the people; increased rainfalls, an influx of money from abroad, and

30 See al-Baradūnī 1983: 521–533.

31 Al-Ḥamdī remains much revered among the Yemeni people, although it is doubtful whether his Corrective Movement would have been successful. The al-Ḥamdī era is well documented, see e.g., Koszinowski 1978: 75–77; al-Baradūnī 1983: 521–533; al-Shahārī 1983; Burrowes 1987: 57–85; al-Ẓāhirī 1996: 164–179; Jallūl 1999: 52–60; al-'Aynī 2000: 281–316; Dresch 2000: 124–130; Blumi 2018: 124–134; Ẓāfir 2020; and Nu'mān 2022. For a collection of al-Ḥamdī's speeches, see Wizārat al-I'lām wa-l-Thaqāfa (n.d.). On Local Development Associations (LDAs), see Peterson 1982: 154–156; and Carapico 1998: 108–134.

32 Koszinowski 1978: 71–73.

33 Koszinowski 1978: 74; Peterson 1982: 116.

favourable developments in the economy augured well for the success of his Corrective Movement.

Al-Ḥamdī's agenda deeply unsettled and antagonized the government shaykhs: those luminaries among the republican shaykhs who had been instrumental in overthrowing the last imam, who had secured important posts and sinecures in Sanaa, and who were determined to defend their new power by any means necessary. The shaykhs in Sanaa felt that it was high time to take countermeasures, and Mujāhid Abū Shawārib had come to Sufyān to sound out Aḥmad Ḥaydar's position, in a conversation from friend to friend, from shaykh to shaykh, to explore the possibility of mobilizing him and the Sufyān against al-Ḥamdī. Because after all, he argued, what was at stake was the future of all the tribes in Yemen.

Yet at the end of the day, Abū Shawārib's plan did not work out. Al-Ḥamdī's Corrective Movement had aroused hopes and produced a widespread sense of a new beginning among those who were not part of the government in Sanaa. Like many other former royalist shaykhs, Aḥmad Ḥaydar had felt side-lined and neglected by the YAR's government. He and many other Bakīl shaykhs resented what they perceived as an undue surge of Ḥāshid power, and regarded the Corrective Movement as an opportunity to turn things around and radically alter the new balance of power in the YAR. Indeed they watched with no small amount of satisfaction when al-Ḥamdī took a clear stance against 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who at that time had begun to proclaim himself "paramount shaykh of Yemen," and claim seniority (outrageously they believed) over all other shaykhs and tribes, including those of Bakīl. Instead, al-Ḥamdī relied on Amīn Abū Rās, minister of state and scion of an ancient and respected shaykhly lineage from al-Jawf and likewise a hero of the revolution, who was at that time recognized as a senior shaykh of Bakīl.³⁴ Al-Ḥamdī's anti-Ḥāshid and anti-Saudi policy and his rapprochement with South Yemen helped to bring Bakīl support behind his regime, for the Bakīl saw an opportunity to break the political hegemony of the Ḥāshid and set right the perceived imbalance of power.

In political terms, Mujāhid Abū Shawārib's visit to Aḥmad Ḥaydar yielded no results, and when the time came to say goodbye, he returned to Sanaa without a promise of support. In the months that followed, the conflict between al-Ḥamdī and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar became acute. Al-Aḥmar withdrew with his followers from Sanaa to Khamir in al-ʿUṣaymāt, and Ṣa'da city became another

34 Until his assassination in May 1978, Amīn Abū Rās was the YAR's "near-perpetual minister of state"; see Peterson 1982: 110.

hotspot of resistance against al-Ḥamdī.³⁵ In 1977 war eventually broke out; al-Ḥamdī's government used tanks and warplanes against the rebels. In Sufyān, Aḥmad Ḥaydar blocked the road at al-Mudarrij, as he had throughout the 1960s civil war, to disrupt communication between the rebels in Khamir and in Ṣa'da city and to cut off the land route between al-Aḥmar and the Saudis.³⁶ At the end of July 1977, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar gave up his armed resistance. It looked as if al-Ḥamdī had triumphed.

Yet three months later, immediately before a visit to Aden to further advance unification with the Marxist PDRY, al-Ḥamdī and his brother were murdered in mysterious circumstances.³⁷ Shortly thereafter Amīn Abū Rās, senior shaykh of Bakīl and close confidant of al-Ḥamdī, fell victim to poison. Al-Ḥamdī's successor, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, turned the tide again by strengthening the position of the Ḥāshid shaykhs and the Saudis and removing al-Ḥamdī loyalists from their posts.³⁸ Unrest broke out again, this time in southern Yemen and along the border between the *shaṭrayn*. In the northern highlands, al-Ḥamdī's followers, infuriated by his murder, formed the "13 June Movement," named after al-Ḥamdī's "Corrective Movement of 13 June 1974," to avenge his death and topple the regime of his assassins.³⁹ Again, the front ran along Jabal Aswad, which marks the border between Sufyān and al-'Uṣaymāt. The historical sensitivity between Ḥāshid and Bakīl sprang up with alarming intensity and galvanized tribes to mobilize; a "general war between Ḥāshid and Bakīl" was looming.⁴⁰ Thousands of warriors gathered on each side, and more kept coming. When fighting broke out, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and Mujāhid Abū Shawārib faced each other as war leaders. After a few days, Mujāhid Abū Shawārib was wounded in the chest by a Sufyānī bullet. The crisis at Jabal Aswad could be defused through mediation, but the friendship between Aḥmad Ḥaydar and Mujāhid Abū Shawārib was beyond repair.

Shortly thereafter, al-Ghashmī also met a violent death, and 'Alī 'Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ, a military officer from Sanḥān (a minor Ḥāshid tribe), came to power. As a commander of Ta'iz military district, at the time of the crisis at Jabal Aswad he had been instrumental in driving 'Abdallāh 'Abd al-'Alīm, the figurehead of

35 Some shaykhs from the Ṣa'da area, particularly the Saḥār tribe, played prominent roles on the republican side in the 1960s civil war (Brandt 2017a: 39–61). These shaykhs also suspected that their new national influence would be diminished by al-Ḥamdī's reforms.

36 Abū Laḥūm (2004: vol. 3: 175) refers to a 1977 letter by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar complaining about Aḥmad Ḥaydar's roadblocks in Sufyān.

37 On al-Ḥamdī's assassination on 11 October 1977, see Rondot 1978; and Mermier 2017.

38 Al-Ghashmī's brother was a shaykh of the Hamdān Sanaa tribe (Ḥāshid).

39 On the 13 June Movement, see Burrowes 1987: 95–96, 99–100; and Zāfir 2020.

40 Dresch 1989: 365–366.

the 13 June Movement, across the border into South Yemen.⁴¹ Šāliḥ inherited from his predecessors a state in disorder and a situation akin to civil war, in which numerous political, ideological, and tribal forces competed for power and influence, while the YAR's neighbours – Saudi Arabia and the PDRY – were plotting to implement their plans in Yemen. A newcomer in the political arena, Šāliḥ needed strong allies outside the military as well. His first act in office was to reappoint many of the shaykhs who had been dismissed by al-Ḥamdī, with the aim of winning their favour and support. In doing so, he secured the support of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and the major Ḥāshid shaykhs, which reinforced the antagonism of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and all those who had supported al-Ḥamdī. There were plenty of supporters of al-Ḥamdī; these included leftists, modernists, Nasirites, many Bakīl and other non-Ḥāshid shaykhs, and the socialists in Aden.

Only four months after taking office, pro-Ḥamdī Nasirites attempted a coup to overthrow Šāliḥ's still shaky regime.⁴² With great difficulty, Šāliḥ put down the coup, which helped him to establish control and tighten the reins of government. His victory, however narrow, enabled him to strengthen security, arrest and execute a large number of opponents, and consolidate his regime.⁴³ His opponents watched with alarm when Šāliḥ, now firmly installed at the helm, strengthened the position of the Ḥāshid, drew closer to the Saudis, and refused any dialogue with Aden.⁴⁴ The result was another crisis: in 1979 a new border war broke out with its southern sister state, bringing to light the internal weaknesses of the YAR, which was shattered by infighting.⁴⁵ In both crises, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar rushed to Šāliḥ's side, rallied the Ḥāshid tribes – over whom he wielded enormous influence at that time – and helped Šāliḥ survive the ordeals of his early tenure.⁴⁶

41 Dresch 2000: 147–148.

42 The Nasirist coup attempt of October 1978 was backed by Libya, see Peterson 1982: 124–125; Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 339.

43 After the Nasirist coup, repression became particularly severe. In the wake of the coup the total number of executions exceeded one hundred, and over 7,000 people were arrested, see Halliday 1985: 4; Gueyras and Shehadi 1979: 22.

44 Koszinowski 1980: 176.

45 In the border war of 1978–79, YAR forces performed dismally, and PDRY and NDF forces were able to penetrate deeply into YAR territory. Ta‘iz and Ibb almost fell to the PDRY. Embarrassed by the failures of the YAR forces, many tribes defected to the NDF side, see Peterson 1982: 125; and Burrowes 1987: 95–96.

46 See al-Aḥmar 2008: 237–238. During the 1979 war, Šāliḥ wrote a letter to al-Aḥmar, demanding the mobilization of all tribesmen to ward off the southern attack at the YAR's border. The letter is reproduced in al-Aḥmar's memoirs (2008: annex 48).

The next challenge already awaited Ṣāliḥ. In the aftermath of the 1979 border war the pro-Ḥamdī movement (the so-called “13 June Movement”) united with the National Democratic Front (NDF), a militant Aden-sponsored leftist movement, then took advantage of the YAR’s instability to try to overthrow Ṣāliḥ.⁴⁷ The NDF operated mainly in the “central areas” (*al-manātiq al-wuṣṭā*) near the internal border between North and South. It united most movements that opposed the Ṣāliḥ regime and considerably enlarged its base of support by obtaining the support of many tribes of Bakīl: Sufyān, Arḥab, ‘Iyāl Yazīd, ‘Iyāl Surayḥ, Āl ‘Ammār, Dhū Ḥusayn, Dhū Muḥammad, and many others, all of whom resented the new surge of Ḥāshid influence in the YAR. Ḥaydar, Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s firstborn son and designated heir, rose to become field commander of the NDF in Sufyān. ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar firmly positioned himself on Ṣāliḥ’s side. Once again, the Ḥaydar and al-Aḥmar families were facing each other as figure-heads of opposing movements.

3 Somatic Sufyān (1974–1980)

Year by year, so it seemed, the area became more restless, and Sufyān ever more embroiled in strife and turmoil. While in other areas the republic established itself and provided stability, incipient development and – in the bitterly poor country – a modicum of affluence, in Sufyān tension never seemed to ease. When Aḥmad Ḥaydar was deeply involved in the power struggles of the fledgling state, his son Mujaḥid, born on the day of Mujaḥid Abū Shawārib’s visit in 1974, grew up in Wasiṭ al-Dal’a, the ancestral place (*makān al-āba’ wa-l-ajdād*) of bayt Ḥaydar a few kilometres south of the narrow pass of al-Mudarrij. From Mujaḥid’s earliest childhood, the deep sense of peril and tension prevailing in Sufyān determined his perceptions, his upbringing, his acquisition of knowledge, in short, the formation of his person. Experiences of violence and attempts at coercion continued to influence the path of his life and left untold scars on body and soul. The constant threat and unrest was mirrored in the environment surrounding his village, which likewise stood testimony to Sufyān’s troubled past and present.

47 On the NDF, see Lackner 1985: 85–98; Gueyras and Shehadi 1979: 22; Koszinowski 1980: 187–191; Burrowes 1987: 99–107; Dresch 2000: 151–156; Abū Laḥm 2004: vol. 3: passim; and Brehony 2011: 109–115, 140–143.

Our villages consist of large houses, most of them built of mud (*tīn*).⁴⁸ Our old house [in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍalʿa] is made of stone; it is a tall, square bastion, centuries old and now partially ruined at the top. The house has no windows, only on the upper floors there are a few small ventilation openings and embrasures. Inside, the house has an ingenious opening, through which one can watch from the top floor who is knocking on the entrance door. This opening runs inside the wall, so that the residents of the house can see from the top floor who is standing in front of the entrance, without being exposed to anyone inside or outside the house, because the outer wall is one meter wide. In another of our old houses, no one other than its residents can open the massive entrance door; it has a wooden lock that can only be opened with a complicated mechanism involving inserting the fingers of the hand in a certain position, which is known only to two people of the house. In our village, there is also a cistern (*birka*) with a surface of four square meters and a depth of three meters, which our forebears chiselled deep into the rock in ancient times. There is also a mosque and a water well, and many of the passageways (*mumarrāt*) in the village run below the surface of the ground, like trenches. They are still in use.

Next to the old house is the new house of the Ḥaydar family, built in the 1970s. This house is also meant for protection, not ornament, as defence and utility take priority over aesthetics, convenience, and appearance. The new house consists of two parts: a mud building is directly attached to a stone building of almost the same size, making for a striking break in style. In front of the house is a spacious courtyard about 250 square meters, and the whole complex is surrounded by a massive wall. The wall, about 2.5 metres high, is reinforced by circular flanking towers (*ḥuṣūn*) of mud (*tīn*), each about 6 metres high, on the outside corners. The towers' defensive platforms are protected by parapets with a number of embrasures in their walls. From the defensive platforms and embrasures, the sections of the wall between them can be swept from the side by ranged weapons. The parapets feature special arched window openings that only open downwards, so the area surrounding the wall, gate, and towers can be monitored and defended without the defender being exposed to enemy fire.

48 Until the mid-1980s, the dominant building technique employed throughout the entire northern and north-east plateaux region was *zabur*: walls are erected by superimposing hand-shaped layers of compacted earth (*tīn*), see Varanda 1982: 90–91; and Gingrich and Heiss 1986: 91, 114.

The compound is situated right on the public road. On the side of the village facing away from the road, small walled fields are planted with *dhurra* and artificially irrigated *qāt*. Flocks of sheep and black goats browse among the brick walls and scrub and enliven the ensemble with their bright bleating voices. The large old *sidr* trees growing near the fields offer a pleasing contrast to the glaring emptiness of windswept hills surrounding the village.

All the trees you see are *‘ulūb sidr* trees, many of them more than 100 years old.⁴⁹ The honey that comes from these trees is very pure and has therapeutic properties. People from Ḥaḍramawt and Shabwa come and harvest our *‘ilb* trees with their bees. And then they sell it under the name *‘asl ‘uṣaymī*, honey from al-‘Uṣaymāt, albeit it is from us, *‘asl sufyanī*.

After Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a comes ‘Uḍālim. And after ‘Uḍālim comes al-Mudarrij, and after al-Mudarrij comes Muqarram, and after this al-Ḥashara, and after this Darb Zayd. All of them are little turreted settlements with small agricultural areas that belong to us and our tribal segment, the Dhū Aḥmad of Ruhm of Sufyān. And after this comes al-‘Amashiyya, which belongs to a number of tribal segments: our segment, the Dhū Ḥasan, and the Dhū Ṣumaym of Sufyān. ‘Amīsh [al-‘Amashiyya] is our shared property, and all these segments are free to graze their flocks on it.⁵⁰

My family’s estate is large: A square kilometre at our ancestral home in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a. A thousand *libna*⁵¹ elsewhere. And a strip of five kilometres in length and a quarter-kilometre in width extending from Ḥibāsha to Jabal al-Maflūq. A thousand *libna* in al-Jawf. A thousand *libna* in Darb Zayd. Our share (*naṣībna*) of al-‘Amashiyya has never been determined because we do not divide al-‘Amashiyya among the tribes [of Sufyān].

49 The evergreen *‘ilb* (pl. *‘ulūb*) or *sidr* tree (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) is also known as Christ’s Thorn, Jujube, or Nabkh tree.

50 Both Islamic law and customary law distinguish between two basic categories of land and its resources: private land owned and used exclusively by a specific group(s) or individual(s), and collective territory and its natural resources. The usage of the latter is regulated according to contractual shareholding, see Varisco 1982: 230–235; Dresch 1989: 336–342; and Weir 2007: 17–19.

51 The exact dimension of the surface unit *libna* could not be determined. The size of the *libna* (also pronounced *lubna*) differs across Yemen, even in the same governorate. In Sanaa one *libna* is equivalent to 114.49 square meters, but it may be of different size in Sufyān (Daniel Varisco, personal communication, April 2022). Glaser gives the dimensions of one *libna* as 100 square *dhira’āt* (one *dhira’* = the length from the elbow to the outstretched fingertips), see Dostal 1993: 33.

Our estate is vast, even if there is little arable land because most of it is arid and rocky. And the wars did not allow us to carry out real agricultural work. This is Sufyān: semi-desert and rocks and *wādīs* (valleys).

The roof of the Ḥaydar family's house in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a commands a superb view of the road and, beyond it, across Sufyān's scrub-covered and rock-bound hills that lay low against the ceiling of sky: this is the bleak, austere grandeur of al-ʿAmashiyya. As far as the eye can reach, the landscape is undulating, ochre, arid, dusty. To the north-east rises the dark shadow of Jabal Maflūq, Sufyān's signature mountain with its broken core. On a clear day, distant mountain ranges appear on the horizon: the mountains of Ṣa'da to the north, the Baraṭ plateau to the east, al-Ahnūm and the Shahāra massif to the south-west.

The main gate in the compound's outer wall opens directly onto the public asphalt road that runs dark like a fresh scar against Sufyān's landscape painted out boldly in heavy brush-strokes of ochre. The road, albeit somewhat narrow for such an important corridor, is well trafficked, and the sound of passing vehicles is audible day and night. Whoever travels on this road must pass the compound of *bayt* Ḥaydar in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a and, about four kilometres further to the north, through the narrow gap of al-Mudarrīj.

Our house is full of large chests packed with old papers (*awrāq qadīma*) left behind by our fathers and forefathers, [papers] that concern our family, our history, our relations, and our territories.... Some of the old papers are contained in casings made of silver. I remember that one day I opened one of those silver casings and found in it orders and correspondences (*aḥkām wa-murāsālāt*) between the Imam [of that time] and one of my ancestors, all of them bearing the Imam's seals: large seals, and small ones that looked like the imprint of a signet ring, all in crimson colour. I remember the words of the Imam, who demanded, in one of these letters, one of my grandfathers' obedience and wrote that he would complain to Our Lord [God] about my ancestor if he did not control the situation in Sufyān and ensure the safety of the transit of commercial caravans. In another letter the Imam wrote to one of my ancestors, "The state cannot secure the roads if you do not cooperate with us in controlling your tribes and provide security and stability. For the sake of brotherhood and peace we call upon you to get the situation in Sufyān under control."

The situation in Sufyān, so it seemed, was always tense. *Bayt* Ḥaydar was surrounded by unrest. The conflict between Sufyān and al-ʿUṣaymāt for the disputed lands in Wādī Ḥabṭā' and many other border conflicts dragged on.

Unable to break the relentless feeling of envy and enmity that existed between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, their rivalry was projected into the political realm, with both families engaged in ongoing battles for primacy against a background of system change and state formation in northern Yemen. In the 1960s, the civil war came right to their door, and in the 1970s the crises of state building continued to penetrate deeply into Sufyān. The years of Mujaḥid's infancy and childhood were a tumultuous time, feverish and restive. His father was on duty as principal shaykh of Sufyān and commander of the Sufyān axis during the revolution, at the time of al-Ḥamdī, through the battle of Jabal Aswad, for the 13 June Movement, and in the guerrilla war of the NDF. During all these crises Aḥmad Ḥaydar coordinated the military mobilizations of the Sufyān in the political struggles of highland Yemen. He always seemed to be busy: tribesmen, fellow shaykhs, military men and envoys of the governments of the time went in and out of the house in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a. During the major mobilizations and roadblocks, the courtyard of their house resembled a garrison. Tribal guards and men at arms, heavily armed and prepared for anything, appeared to replace one another in imposing numbers, and sentries patrolled everywhere. On the staircase leading to his father's *dīwān* the people ascended and descended in a continuous bustle that prevailed from early morning till evening. Aḥmad Ḥaydar, in his *dīwān*, received visitors, listened to complaints, solved problems, made plans, and gave his orders.

This environment was the background for Mujaḥid's formative years; during this time, role models, worldviews, values, moral principles, and social knowledge that determined individual and collective identity were communicated and understood through observation and emulation, and this embodied experience became the starting point for his participation in this world. The immersion into this cosmos of learning and the acquisition of knowledge took place outside the confines of schools and formal education and rather resembled a kind of personal apprenticeship, a process based on oral transmission and emulation.⁵² One of the major influences of his youth was the immersion in tribal culture and the values of tribalism (*qabyala*) upheld by the rules of

52 In this system of learning based on observation, emulation, everyday practice, and “on-site” formation of a person, teachers embodied knowledge, they did not only convey it through books or texts. This process of learning through embodiment, defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world, shows certain similarities with Marchand's concept of “apprenticeship,” in which the acquisition of knowledge among artisans extends to other domains, including emotional, sensorial, spatial, and somatic representations, see Marchand 2008.

customary law; these values prepared him for his later role as the shaykh.⁵³ The master teachers were his father, his older brothers, their counsellors, and the other members of the family.

The tribal system is a holistic system (*nizām mutakāmil*) governing in our areas. I am not diligent and I do not know how all this knowledge came into my head, but I inherited it from the memory of my father and forefathers. I was always with my father and his counsellors and participated in their meetings with the tribesmen, and benefited from what I heard and saw. My father, may God rest his soul, was illiterate. But he knew tribal law and precedence (*urf wa-silf*) and dispensed justice among the people and solved their problems. Most tribesmen know the tribal customs and traditions and guide themselves in their issues according to them. They do not need a shaykh except for the big issues. Only when there is a person, a family, or a tribal segment who violate the tribal customs and open the door to evil, the tribe needs the shaykh to issue a verdict in their name and set things right.

My father had an exceptional command of *firāsa* [i.e., insight into human nature on the basis of bodily features].⁵⁴ He could tell by appearance and speech if someone was a good person, or a brave person, or a bad person, or a liar, or an imposter, or a coward who only pretended to be heroic: he knew them and time always proved the veracity of his opinion.

Tribal governance is both a competitive and cooperative enterprise, and Aḥmad Ḥaydar, as did his peers, administered his tribe through a second tier of tribal officials consisting of counsellors (sg. *mustashār*) and elders (*a'yān*). A number of knowledgeable and experienced people representing all segments of Ruhm advised him and helped him to administer the tribe.⁵⁵ The collective character of tribal leadership helps the institution of shaykhdom to provide continuity in times of transition and disruption.⁵⁶ And indeed, after his father's death

53 *Qabyala* (tribalness) is a purely Yemeni term and not synonymous with *qabaliyya*, which is frequently used to refer to tribalism in the Middle East. The concept of *qabyala* synthesizes the multiple local understandings of tribalism as a moral, social, political, legal, and aesthetic system, see Adra 1982; Adra 1988; Adra 2021; and Caton 1990: 25–49.

54 *Firāsa* translates as “physiognomy.”

55 On the roles and responsibilities of *a'yān* (sg. *ayn*), see Abū Ghānim 1985: 228–230; and Weir 2007: 68.

56 On tribal leadership as a cooperative and collective enterprise and the roles and responsibilities of the counsellors of a shaykh, see al-ʿAlīmī 1988: 80; Gingrich 1989: 128–129; and Weir 2007: 68–69, 79.

in 1987, when Mujāhid succeeded him at the age of 13, the counsellors of his father stood by his side and helped him grow into the role of the shaykh.

My father and his counsellors explained everything to me. And after my father's death, his counsellors assisted me and continued to advise me whenever I needed it. Most of them have died now, may God have mercy on them. And I appointed new counsellors to replace them. [These were] experienced and outspoken people who told me the truth to my face, regardless of whether it would incite my wrath. [They were] people whom I trusted utterly and completely, for sincerity is the most precious of all boon [blessings]. Some I appointed on the basis of the soundness of their opinions. Others I chose for their superior leadership qualities, or their military experience.

My father was very fond of me, may God rest his soul. I was one of his favourites, even though I was neither the best looking nor the brightest among his sons. Our sages say that the father is the most honest in determining who of his sons takes after him and who does not. This is the intuition of paternity.

Mujāhid watched his father with the eyes of an infant, and his father studied him with the experienced eyes of the adult and senior shaykh. And with his unusual insight into human nature, he recognized early on that there was something special in Mujāhid, something unbridled, wilful, and headstrong, a character driven by constant, competitive zeal. The “Ḥaydar blood,” people used to say in Sufyān, aware that “Ḥaydar” is one of the many names for “lion,” here it denotes the animal's characteristic bravery. Mujāhid had a touch of it, and his eldest brother, Ḥaydar, more than a touch (which took him to an early grave). His father was well aware that this touch of Ḥaydar blood was needed to navigate the tribe of Sufyān through these restive times, and to prevail as the shaykh of this vast, embattled land. For at this critical juncture in the history of Yemen, marked by tectonic shifts in the country's balance of power, there must be no compromise with enemies, no diluted solutions and concessions, no half-measures, no signs of weakness. The Sufyān would not cede one inch of ground to al-ʿUṣaymāt in al-Suwād. They would defend and maintain their rights and struggle to assert their place in the framework of the new state. And for that purpose they would continue to block the road at the narrow gap of al-Mudarrij whenever it pleased them. They would not yield.

4 Early Displacements (1980–81, 1984–87)

Mujāhid was still a child when he became the object of a bargain. At the age of six, the world of politics was thrust into his life, it seized on his body and rendered him a pawn in the evolving struggle between his father and the Ṣāliḥ regime. He became a hostage in the way described by Mauss, for his role as hostage was like being held as surety for a pledge.⁵⁷

In 1980, Ṣāliḥ stepped up his campaign against the NDF, the militant Aden-sponsored leftist movement that had become the rallying point of those dissatisfied with the status quo in Yemen, those who sought to overthrow his regime. The major arena of this struggle was the “central areas” in Lower Yemen near the border between YAR and PDRY; hence the campaign against the NDF was called the “War of the Central Areas” (*ḥarb al-Manāṭiq al-Wuṣṭā*).⁵⁸ But the NDF also wielded influence in the north, especially among the supporters of the late President al-Ḥamdī, who at that point helped to swell the NDF’s ranks. The NDF united most movements opposing the Ṣāliḥ regime and further enlarged its base of support by including many of those Bakīl tribes that had sympathized with al-Ḥamdī and after his demise joined the 13 June Movement. The War of the Central Areas left the country embroiled in strife and rebellion and shook the Ṣāliḥ regime to the core.

In order to fight the NDF in Lower Yemen, Ṣāliḥ’s major strategic dilemma involved establishing calm in the north.⁵⁹ Dislodging the NDF guerrillas in the central areas required redeploying units stationed near Sanaa to the south, which left the capital vulnerable to another coup attempt by his adversaries in the military and by hostile highland tribes. Ṣāliḥ’s memories of the tribal mobilizations of the late 1970s were still fresh. The Sufyān, in particular, remained a perpetual menace, for they seemed to seize upon every opportunity to rise up in arms. Ṣāliḥ knew if he withdrew his troops from Sanaa and southern ‘Am-rān, the capital lay open to any incursion from the north, and the Sufyān would not hesitate to stab him in the back. He was fully cognizant of the fact that at the first sign of regime distraction, the Sufyān and their likes would be on their way, ready to enjoy his overthrow.

It is an understatement to say that Ṣāliḥ’s vexation with the Sufyān intensified in 1979 when the asphalt road connecting Sanaa and Ṣa’dā was completed. The completion of the construction work reduced travel time of the 245 km journey between the two cities from ten to four hours and meant that

57 Mauss 1990: 59.

58 On the War of the Central Areas, see Lackner 1985: 85–98; and al-Ṭawīl 2009: 170–190.

59 A CIA report from that time describes this strategic dilemma, see CIA 1981: 8.

(for better or worse) formerly remote royalist bastions, including Sufyān, were much closer to the capital.⁶⁰ The old road had been dangerous enough because land mines, easily laid under its unsealed surface, had taken a heavy toll on men and vehicles in times of unrest. Now traffic increased, and all kinds of opportunities for business, travel, contact, and incursions opened up. Šāliḥ was painfully aware that he needed to establish control over this road, but could not send the army for this purpose, for the Sufyān would respond in kind, and the whole affair would provoke a major clash at the worst possible time, when the regime needed to focus on the central areas. Rather, he had to resort to other means to rein in this tribe.

And, interestingly enough, at that very point, the security situation on the highway spun out of control. There were non-stop incidents of highway banditry on the road that traversed Sufyān; these involved cases of killing, sabotage, stealing, and looting. Al-ʿAmashiyya achieved a particularly questionable notoriety; it soon gained the reputation of being a dangerous place, and indeed the area looked desolate enough.⁶¹ It seemed just the sort of place where one would expect to meet brigands.

At the time of my childhood, Sufyān was a frightening and terrifying place. The nights, in particular, were full of terrors. It was a remote area, and in al-ʿAmashiyya most areas close to the road were devoid of settlements and people. And this is why brigands came from other provinces and looted travellers at night and the travellers believed that we, the Sufyān, were behind it. This really damaged our reputation. And then we heard that during the nights there were cases of killing, looting, and robbery of travellers in al-ʿAmashiyya, and it turned out that it was Šāliḥ's men who did this in order to use it against us, because it is our territory, and the state insisted that every shaykh was responsible for what happened in it

60 The upgrading of the road started in imamic times in the early 1960s with Chinese support; it continued during the reign of al-Ḥamdī. See Burrowes 1987: 20–21, 46, 67, 71–74; and Lichtenthäler 2003: 76–77. In 1979, the construction work was completed, see Meyer 1986: 265. The two bridges at al-Mudarrij in Sufyān were constructed by a Chinese construction company in the mid-1970s. On the political significance of roads for regime politics, especially the so-called “stabilization roads,” see the Sudan case study by Bachmann, Pendle, and Moro 2022.

61 Lichtenthäler (2003: 134) mentions that on this road escorts were essential, and that merchants travelled in armed convoys when they crossed Sufyān, because the area was said to be plagued by robbers. Foreign NGOs were virtually absent, and officials working for multilateral and bilateral donor organizations were not permitted by their organizations to travel on the road to Šaʿda.

[his territory]. Whereas in our opinion the opposite was true: the state was responsible for providing security, not the citizens.

My father sent out night patrols with orders to mount a watch on the road, and indeed they managed to apprehend bandits and handed them over to the authorities. Yet then we learnt that after a few days the authorities always set them free. One night, our tribesmen caught a band of brigands, and their leaders turned out to be the personal bodyguard and the personal driver of the military commander in al-Ḥarf. We detained them until the next day, then we handed them over to the commander, in front of the people. He ordered that they be fettered by their feet to military vehicles, and they were dragged to death in order to cover up the scandal, lest it expose the manipulations of the regime.⁶²

The Sufyān strongly suspected that the regime's machinations were behind the deterioration of the security situation along the road, but they could not prove it. If indeed Šāliḥ had sent the brigands to loot and kill – and the Sufyān had no doubt that he had – he had taken care to see that they came under cover of night, without uniforms, in the guise of common brigands. And each further incident on the road nurtured prevalent preconceptions of the grim and troublesome character of the Sufyān.

The regime's strategy was aimed at provoking Aḥmad Ḥaydar where he was most sensitive: his honour. As we saw when discussing tribal territories and borders, notions of honour, liability, and guaranty are moral values of paramount importance among the tribes. What happens within the territory of a tribe affects the honour of the tribe, for the tribe is seen responsible for what happens in its territory and the roads traversing it. Armed confrontations arising from political disputes were one thing; the other were criminal activities and highway banditry. In tribal law, roadblocks and the disruption of traffic are not expressly permitted, but are tolerated as means of control (*ḍabt*). Highway banditry (*ḥirāba*), however, involving killing, injury, or robbery, is punishable according to both state and tribal law.⁶³ Therefore, when blocking a road, a tribe will always avoid causing any damage to people or their property, lest it transgress the line between control (*ḍabt*) and banditry (*ḥirāba*). Whichever way one looked at it, the Sufyān were responsible for the safety of travellers

62 Executing someone by publicly dragging them to death behind a vehicle was a practice that was still applied during the Ša'da wars (2004–10) to deter people from joining the Ḥūthi movement, see Brandt 2017a: 158–159, 178, 282.

63 On highway banditry in Islamic law, see Wajis 1996; Bassiouni 1997: 279–280; and Asri and Ruslan 2020.

in their area, and if the situation persisted it would have lowered their tribal prestige and sullied their honour. Aḥmad Ḥaydar faced two issues, one related to his honour, and the other a challenge to his abilities as shaykh. Moreover, as the Sufyān's senior shaykh and main representative, he was the primary tribal member representing the whole tribe's honour.⁶⁴ Šāliḥ knew that the tribes were fixated on honour. They were bound by their high principles, while Šāliḥ, the "new man," respected nothing but the pragmatics of power. He knew that anyone who challenged Aḥmad Ḥaydar's shaykhly dignity touched on his most sensitive nerves.

By pushing the situation into chaos, the regime worked towards the criminalization of the Sufyān and the creation of (in Foucault's expression) a "delinquent group."⁶⁵ At the same time, Šāliḥ also came forward with a solution: In order to prove his honesty, he demanded the provision of hostages from Aḥmad Ḥaydar, thereby utilizing one of the central (and most effective) instruments of restraint applied by the imams to rein in the tribes and enforce their obedience.⁶⁶ In the days of the Zaydi Imams, hostages were usually the sons of shaykhs: young boys between the ages of five and fifteen, who were taken from their families and held hostage in order to guarantee their fathers' good behaviour. In Sufyān, the memory of this practice was still fresh: before 1962, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his brothers had been hostages of the Imam and had alternated with each other in this status. Since 1962, hostage-taking was no longer an official instrument of state power and coercion; however it was not illegal.⁶⁷

When the imams took hostages, they took them from every important family, so that no one was spared and no one suspected preferential

64 On the role of shaykhs as the main representatives of tribal honour, see Gingrich 2021: 102.

65 Foucault 1977: 266.

66 On the practice of hostage taking before the revolution, see al-Mas'ūdī 2006: 121–129; al-Jabr 2008; Weir 2007: 273–275; and Peskes 2013. On the issue of hostageship in literature, see Dammāj 1984. The last imam released all hostages, a fact that contributed to the loss of the imamate.

67 Although strategic hostage-taking was abandoned in 1962, from a legal point of view hostage-taking remained legitimate after 1962: The first constitution of the republic of 1970 recognizes (in paragraph 42, b and d) hostage-taking as a legitimate personal status and emphasizes the hostages' entitlement to protection from violence and the right to humane treatment. Only in the revised constitution of 1990 is the issue of hostage-taking no longer mentioned, see Peskes 2013. Nevertheless, after 1990, the state continued to take hostages in some isolated cases of acute conflict. Interestingly, all of these documented cases in one way or the other involve the tribe of Sufyān, see e.g., Niewöhner-Eberhard 1985: 8; and Brandt 2013: 129–130.

treatment among the shaykhs. In the Ṣāliḥ era, the hostage-taking was selective, and went under a different name. In the era of the imams they were called “hostages of obedience” (*rahā'in al-tā'a*). In the Ṣāliḥ era, they were called “security hostages” (*rahā'in al-amān*), for giving hostages was a means to acquit a shaykh of security charges or any sort of sedition.

In practice, at night Ṣāliḥ would send men to Sufyān to cause havoc and rob and loot merchants and travellers on the road. The following day, the armed forces would descend on Sufyān and say: “Those [shaykhs] who are innocent [of these crimes] give a son as hostage as proof of their honour,” and the shaykhs would give their sons as hostages to prove their honesty, and [to prove] that they were not involved in highway banditry. These were Ṣāliḥ's devious approaches. Sometimes he would also send workers on the pretext of digging artesian wells for drinking water, or for any further construction work on the road, and ask the shaykh to hand over one of his sons as a security hostage, allegedly in order to protect the workers from any harm. The important point was that Ṣāliḥ took hostages, under whatever name. It was the same system as under the Imams, just under a different name. It was only abandoned with Yemeni unity [in 1990].

Ṣāliḥ's plan proved effective, and in 1980, at the age of six, Mujāhid crossed the threshold of the Qishla, the old Ottoman fort in al-Ḥarf, Sufyān's administrative centre.⁶⁸ When the Qishla's main gateway closed behind him, he breathed a different atmosphere: he was in prison. The impression the Qishla made on Mujāhid was appalling; it was a sombre building that inspired a shudder in those who entered it, even when they had no cause to fear. The dormitories and cells were insanitary and draughty; in the winter the cells were icy cold, and parasites abounded, so the nights were a horror. Coercion and corporal punishment were commonplace, and proved highly obnoxious to so headstrong a mind as Mujāhid's.

The Qishla in al-Ḥarf was a veritable fortress with prison cells, command and administration headquarters, a mosque, grain stores, dormitories for

68 According to local sources, the Qishla in al-Ḥarf was built by the Ottomans. It was also called the “Imam's Fortress” (*qa'at al-imām*) because the Ḥamīd al-Dīn continued to use it after the Ottomans left Yemen. Many sons of shaykhs have been held hostage in the Qishla, see Nashwan News 2021. In republican times the Qishla was expanded with newer buildings, and in 2015 it was severely damaged by the Saudi Air Force in the war against the Ḥūthīs.

the soldiers and bedrooms for the military commanders. And there was a place for locking shackles around the ankles and wrists of the prisoners and removing them before their release.

Lice, fleas, and other insects ate us at night. My father, may God have mercy on him, gave the prison guard a car in exchange for attending to me and sewing my clothes when they were torn and protecting me from the cold of the nights, for in the winter mornings we sometimes woke to the taste of snow in the air. And the prison ward did these tasks for me. But sometimes he would lock me up in a cell at daylight. For he was in the habit of chaining the inmates in the morning and removing the heavy chains at noon in exchange for 50 riyals, which each captive had to give him so that he could buy *qāt* with it.

The prisoners were not allowed to buy water, food, or [fulfil] any other need they had from Qishla's grocery store, so they asked me to buy this secretly for them. I started running small errands for them without charging a fee. By doing so, I deprived the prison guard of a part of his livelihood without him even knowing it. I shall not soon forget the effect my action produced. The discovery roused the man to a fury and he seized a baton to strike me and beat me badly. It was a special sort of baton that was called a prison club. I stood his blows without shedding a tear, and my endurance made him even more furious. After he was done, he locked me in a cell. At night, when I was sitting down on a bundle of hay while trying to overcome the shock and the pain which the violent blow occasioned, he came to me, in sudden compunction and fear from my father. He sat down with me and asked me not to tell my father about the incident.

During his time as a hostage in the Qishla, Mujāhid went through a period of extreme vulnerability. By taking him hostage, the regime had degraded him from being the son of Sufyān's senior shaykh to a young urchin, a weak wretch, defenceless against the violent attacks of the men running this system. The time he spent as a hostage richly nourished his propensity to defiance and black tempers. If it had not yet sunk in, this was the time he became utterly convinced that because he was a Ḥaydar and from Sufyān, the regime hated him, and longed to do him harm. And if the regime was suspicious of him, he now wholeheartedly reciprocated the sentiment. He despised it with equal intensity, loathing its everlasting endeavours to bring him and his family to their knees. Weeks and months of monotony followed this incident, during which he maintained a struggle with low spirits and solitude.

I wrote a letter from prison to my beloved mother. The fellow prisoners laughed at me when they saw me addressing the letter to “my honoured mother” (*ḥaḍarat ummī*). They asked, “Why don’t you send the letter to your honoured father?” I love my mother and respect her intensely, and I had never written a letter before. Even my handwriting looked clumsy and crooked like the furrow of a plough in the soil.

Since my father was in conflict with the regime, he only came to visit me once or twice and was always accompanied by a large number of warriors from our tribe. After a year and a half in captivity, my father understood that it was a bargain whose goal was to enforce his obedience, rather than acquit our tribe of the accusation of highway brigandage. He instructed me to escape from the Qishla and run away on a specific day and specific hour after the evening prayer. At that time he would have about a thousand warriors ready to attack the fort, in case the soldiers chased me after I jumped from the wall.

I waited until dinner, which I used to take together with the commander and the officers and some of the soldiers, after the evening prayer. During dinner, I told the soldiers that I had to take a leak and left the room, but bad luck would have it that my leave did not escape the commander’s practised eye. He thought it suspicious, and sent a soldier after me. I was a child and did not notice. The soldier called out for me to stop before I jumped off the wall, then he caught me by my arm and the collar of my jacket, dragged me back, and maintained his tenacious grip until I gave up. After this I was forbidden to have dinner with the commander and the officers. They would not let me sit with them, nor eat with them any more.

Indeed that night a group of our tribesmen had crawled in stealth beneath the wall I was supposed to jump off, with others waiting in the dark in the vicinity of the Qishla, like shadows. After midnight, when they did not see me, they withdrew, for it would have been useless for them to wait for me any longer. They returned to my father and told him, “Mujāhid did not jump off the wall.”

One week later, my father sent my younger brother Fayṣal to take my place as a hostage and effect my release. At home, he asked me what had happened, and I related to him that the soldier had seized me and prevented my escape. One month later, after it had transpired that my father was getting ready to free his children by force of arms, Ṣāliḥ also released my brother Fayṣal.

More bad tidings followed quickly after Muḡāhid returned home. In 1981, his brother Ḥasan was murdered, marking the beginning of the blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, as I examine in subsequent chapters of this book. In 1982, Muḡāhid's eldest brother Ḥaydar followed Ḥasan in his death, and in 1983 his third brother, Ḥāmis, died. In the early phases of this feud, their enemies sought to act via proxies by sowing discord and encouraging fratricidal conflict among the tribe of Sufyān, and a trickle of militancy and hatred began to seep into the villages, filtering into even the most cloistered places of everyday life.

After he had lost his three eldest sons, Aḥmad Ḥaydar took no chances with his remaining sons Muḡāhid and Fayṣal. In 1984, he evacuated them from Sufyān and sent them to al-Jawf province, which at that time was still largely beyond government influence; covetous and malignant hands were unable to reach them there.⁶⁹ In al-Jawf, Muḡāhid and Fayṣal were placed with the family of a friend and shaykh.

The [internal] war in Sufyān, nourished by al-Aḥmar and Ṣāliḥ, lasted some years and was fought with all sorts of weapons. In these years, there was random shooting, day and night, between the villages; in the centres of the villages, the effects of this are still visible. My father was very keen on our schooling, yet concerned that stray bullets might harm us on our way to school. He resolved to send us to al-Jawf, where we were placed in the care of his close friend Shaykh Ibn Nus'a [of Dhū Ḥusayn of Dahm] and enrolled in school in Saraḥāt al-Matūn. Later, we also established marriage relations (*muṣāhira*) between us and [the family of] Ibn Nus'a when I married one of his daughters. The customs and traditions of the people in al-Jawf are good: the young people are free to choose their spouses, and the couple lives in the house of the wife's family if they wish.⁷⁰ And my brother Fayṣal and I went to visit our family in Sufyān every one or two months.

69 The governorate of al-Jawf was established around 1980; therefore, it was the last region of tribal highland Yemen that was successively incorporated into the Yemeni state system. See Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 265–266.

70 Here Muḡāhid is referring to post-marital ambilocality (i.e., in which couples, upon marriage, choose to live with or near either spouse's parents), which differs from the dominant model of post-marital patrilocality. Ambilocal practices can be found among many other groups in northernmost tribal Yemen (for a case from Khawlān b. Āmir, see Brandt 2017a: 141–142) and beyond (e.g. al-Mahra, according to local evidence). Similar practices in al-Jawf are described by al-Ruwayshān 1997: 160. Local sources often stress the strong position of tribal women in al-Jawf; see al-Dawsari 2014.

Mujāhid spent three years in al-Jawf, never guessing that this was to be, apart from the days of his infancy, the only reasonably peaceful and happy period in his life. In 1987, it came to a sudden end when his father was murdered, and Mujāhid left al-Jawf for Sufyān in order to succeed him and take over the position of the shaykh.

5 The Black and the White

After Ṣāliḥ had overcome (or survived) the early challenges of his tenure, the scales that had been vacillating for so long, tipped slowly and steadily in his direction. In spite of his humble origin and obscure antecedents, he rose to a position beyond reproach and became the lynchpin of a state that was tailored to him and that he shaped almost at will.

During this phase – the 1980s – Ṣāliḥ worked to include a broad array of stakeholders in his system in order to rule on as broad a basis as possible; indeed throughout his life, in a recurring pattern, phases of open conflict were followed by phases of co-optation by his erstwhile foes, whom he brought into the fold of his regime. A national charter (*mīthāq waṭanī*) was drafted, and the so-called General People's Congress (GPC) was convened in 1982. This umbrella organization, which sought to represent a multitude of political and tribal interests, became Ṣāliḥ's main basis of support.⁷¹ Since the YAR constitution did not permit political parties, the GPC served to ensure the broadest possible involvement of influential people under the banner of supporting Ṣāliḥ. In doing so, Ṣāliḥ was perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the times, for he joined the exclusive group of Arab rulers who created around themselves systems of centralized personal rule, and were soon identified as authoritarian and quasi-monarchical.⁷²

71 On the *mīthāq waṭanī*, see al-ʿAmrī 2000. A multitude of Yemeni and foreign studies deals with Ṣāliḥ and his era, both before and after 1990, see e.g., Burrowes 1987: 94–117; Jallūl 1999: 66–73; al-Zāhirī 1996: 181–191; Dresch 2000: 151–168; al-Farah 2002: 55–64; Phillips 2008; Phillips 2011a; Day 2012: 86–106; Hill 2017; Lackner 2017: 100–104; Lackner 2023: 40–74; Blumi 2018: 142–169; al-ʿAshmāwī 2019; and Salām n.d. Because of Yemen's limited freedom of expression, but also admiration for Ṣāliḥ, most local accounts are positive. For a critical view of Ṣāliḥ's government, see al-ʿAbbāsī, who also mentions the political assassination of Aḥmad Ḥaydar in 1987 (al-ʿAbbāsī 1990: 103).

72 Among these Arab rulers were Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (Gamal Abdel Nasser), Ḥabīb Būrḡiba (Habib Bourguiba), Hawwārī Būmadyan (Houari Boumedienne), Muʿamar al-Qadhāfi (Muammar Qaddafi), and Ḥāfīz al-Asad (Hafiz al-Asad), who used their growing powers to entrench themselves firmly in systems that were part republic and part monarchy, see Owen 2012. Owen divides these rulers into two groups: those presiding over states

Šālih brought the Sanḥān tribe (a minor and hitherto rather irrelevant Ḥāshid tribe dwelling on the south-east periphery of the capital) to prominence. It is often said that the YAR, and after 1990 the Republic of Yemen (RoY), were dominated by the tribes of the Ḥāshid confederation. In many respects, however, the matter was not that simple. Šālih's power was primarily sustained by his family and the military, rather than tribal affiliation. Although he hailed from the Sanḥān tribe, Šālih and his associates were "new men," whose prominence depended on careers in the army.⁷³ In spite of his tribal origin, Šālih saw to it that he himself stood above the world of tribalism, and he never acted as a tribesman. He knew that the principal shaykhs of the northern highlands would see a shaykh (in his case even worse, a tribal commoner) in the role of president as an insufferable rival. In many respects positioning himself beyond the realm of tribalism made his position stronger and almost unimpeachable, for henceforward he would be able to wield real power unmolested and unrestrained. A true *homo novus*, he did not feel compelled to adhere to the rules and obligations of *qabyala* and its often exaggerated notions of liability, guaranty, and honour.

Phillips likened the Šālih system to a "series of concentric circles."⁷⁴ At the centre of this system was Šālih. In the innermost circle were his close relatives (sons, nephews, half-brothers, cousins, in-laws), as well as, in a layer slightly further out, the elite of the Sanḥān tribe. The members of this inner echelon, consisting of perhaps fifty people, filled the country's most sensitive military and security positions in the five military regions. Šālih's relative, General 'Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar⁷⁵ (generally seen as Šālih's foster brother), was in charge of the strategically and politically most significant North-Western Military Region and commanded the First Armoured Division (al-Firqa al-Awlā Madarra'), commonly referred to as the Firqa. A widely feared instrument of political and economic coercion, this very limited group served as the "baseline guarantee"⁷⁶ against any challenge to Šālih's power.⁷⁷

in which the central government was relatively strong, as in Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, and Algeria; and those whose relative weakness required a much more elaborate practice of accommodation, negotiation, and compromise with internal rivals and foes, such as Sudan, Libya, and Yemen.

73 Dresch 2000: 159.

74 Phillips 2011a: 87–104.

75 Despite their common surname, there was no family relationship between 'Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar from Sanḥān and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar from al-'Uṣaymāt. For this reason, people in Yemen refer to them as the "two houses of al-Aḥmar" (*baytayn al-Aḥmar*).

76 Phillips 2008: 68.

77 On the evolution of northern Yemen's "tribal-military-commercial complex," see Seitz 2016.

The next circle constituted the wider Yemeni regime, including fluid networks of politicians, merchants, technocrats, and religious and tribal leaders that were still immensely influential. They were held together and controlled by the mechanisms of patronage in posts and pay. The allocation of positions, sinecures, licenses, and funds were exchanged for personal allegiance.⁷⁸ Money served as a lubricant to keep this system working smoothly and efficiently. Throughout his political career Ṣāliḥ excelled in determining what sum one could be bought with, so as to be held in check, and how in this way his rival or enemy could be transformed into a subordinate or ally. Because of his own origin and the prevailing political structures and networks he encountered when he came to power, Ṣāliḥ moved to accommodate, in particular, the major Ḥāshid shaykhs who were led by ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. Thus, Ṣāliḥ’s ascension to power ushered in a “phase of continuity in the quest of state building and coexistence with the tribe,”⁷⁹ which lasted until 1990.⁸⁰ Favouritism towards the Ḥāshid was also rampant in the allocation of lower positions in the civil service and military, which took place through recruitment and enlistment (*tawzīf*).⁸¹ The Ḥāshid always seemed to owe Ṣāliḥ more allegiance than he owed them, and Ṣāliḥ knew that ultimately it was imprudent to exclude some major shaykhs of Bakīl, for example, Nājī l-Shāyif, Sinān Abū Laḥūm, Muḥammad al-Ghādir, and Ṣādiq Abū Rās. They were (or became) Ṣāliḥ’s creatures to the bone, as it was necessary to hold some cards against the Ḥāshid shaykhs.

Beyond these favoured circles were Ṣāliḥ’s political enemies, tribes of dubious loyalty, and the masses, all of whom benefited little or not at all from his government. Ṣāliḥ’s chosen method of dealing with those groups that were able to resist and challenge his rule was a policy of divide and rule – in Arabic *idārat al-ṣirā’* (conflict administration) – that aimed at keeping them divided and distracted. In governing Yemen, Ṣāliḥ’s real feat consisted of pitting his enemies and rivals against each other. Conflict administration, by which he encouraged rivalries and discord, ensured that existing concentrations of power were broken up, and smaller groups were prevented from uniting

78 Phillips 2011a: 87–104.

79 Al-Ṣāḥirī 1996: 181.

80 Al-Ṣāḥirī 1996: 181.

81 Dresch (1995: 41) argues that actually only the tribes of Sanḥān (President Ṣāliḥ’s home tribe) and Hamdān Sanaa (former President al-Ghashmī’s home tribe) really benefited, and – to a lesser extent – Khārif and Banī Ṣuraym, who likewise managed to secure jobs for themselves in the army and civil service through the process of *tawzīf*. ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s home tribe, al-‘Uṣaymāt, on the other hand, benefited very little, and shortly after Yemeni unity in the early 1990s, half of them would have voted for the socialists, the nemesis of Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar.

against him. Throughout his career, his intuitive knowledge of psychology enabled him to turn rivalries among his enemies to his own benefit, by feeding their animosities and thus ensuring that they would hold one another in check. This “politics of permanent crisis”⁸² was by no means limited to the circle of his domestic adversaries, nor was it specific to Ṣāliḥ’s rule, for throughout the history of Yemen, rulers who sought to superimpose their rule on the tribes often did so by resorting to this strategy. Ṣāliḥ even applied this approach on the foreign policy stage, when he opened Yemen and its rich hydrocarbon resources to rapacious foreign powers and neoliberal world markets in order to finance his corrupt government and its enormous military and security apparatus.⁸³ In foreign politics, Ṣāliḥ exploited Yemen’s crises and conflicts (that he mostly fabricated and orchestrated) to attract foreign budgetary and military assistance. Ultimately, the entirety of this fabricated chaos of permanent crises served to “make Yemen dance.”⁸⁴

Domestically, the Bakīl in particular became a target of this policy, for a great many of them resented what they perceived as a surge of Ḥāshid favouritism after 1978. Ṣāliḥ considered them dangerous because, in terms of numbers and territory, the Bakīl were the largest confederation of the highlands and the northern steppe, far larger than the Ḥāshid. United they would be able to paralyse any government. The Bakīl tribes of sizeable faraway areas of northern ‘Amrān, eastern Ṣa‘da, and al-Jawf, in particular, were known as unbridled and difficult to control. Given their mobility and ever recurring raids, these tribes were dreaded, particularly by city dwellers, and peasants in Lower Yemen.⁸⁵ Because of their transnational mobility and ongoing raids (they frequently crossed the Yemeni-Saudi border), the Saudis also considered them dangerous. The Saudis also preferred to strengthen ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and the tribes of Ḥāshid, because their territories were located in the vicinity of Sanaa, far from Saudi territory and the vulnerable Yemeni-Saudi border, and therefore they were not seen as a threat.⁸⁶

82 Phillips 2011a. For a similar approach, see Wedeen 2008: 148–185.

83 Blumi 2018: 142–169.

84 Blumi 2018: 142.

85 In the works of Yemen’s tenth-century scholar and geographer al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī, the tribes of Wā’ilah and Dahm embody courage and other timeless qualities that still represent the ideals of Yemen’s tribal societies: honour, strength, nobility, and the idea of the protection of the weak. Yet al-Hamdānī also describes them as indomitable avengers, see al-Hamdānī 1968: 194–195. On raiding, see the numerous mentions in al-‘Amrī 1986 and Dresch 2006.

86 Nevertheless, the border shaykhs were also included in Saudi (and Yemeni) patronage networks in order to stabilize the vulnerable Yemeni-Saudi border. See Brandt 2017a: 75–97; and Lenz-Ayoub 2021.

Since Ṣāliḥ assumed power, he and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar considered the tribes of Bakīl their enemies and worked towards dispersing them by igniting the fires of war and feuds among them. Did you know that since 1978, when Ṣāliḥ came to power, weapons of all kinds – light, medium, and heavy – became readily available in the tribal markets in Yemen, like potatoes or tomatoes in the markets in other countries? They were imported by the state and in the name of the ministry of defence, and then distributed [to local markets] by arms merchants who were Ṣāliḥ’s business partners. This happened with the aim of tearing apart the tribes of Bakīl, lest they unite and take power from him. Because the tribes of Bakīl with their sheer numbers, geographical location, and ferocity would easily be able to take power from any ruler by force of arms or through the ballot box. This was the goal behind overstocking the markets with arms. The state imported the weapons, then these weapons landed in the markets for the tribes, and then they used them to fight each other, after the regime had planted the seeds of hatred, revenge, killing, and wars among them. Ṣāliḥ produced some minor problems among other tribes, too, so that the tribes of Bakīl would not suspect that they were the main target of these criminal schemes. Ṣāliḥ never worked to implement stability, law and order, and the tribes continued to cause chaos; there was no discipline, no justice, no development, no rights; the aim of creating internal chaos among the tribes was meant to ensure their fragmentation. Ṣāliḥ always worked to weaken and divide the tribes of Bakīl, and after some years he and al-Aḥmar installed Nājī l-Shāyif as senior shaykh of Bakīl.⁸⁷

The fomenting of internal conflict among those who were considered potential threats certainly resembles what Bauman called “liquid modernity”: those at the top create as much chaos as possible for those lower down, so that they may rule more easily.⁸⁸ Indeed the massive distribution of weapons to the tribes became a cheap bribe, neither moral nor prudent. In the mid-2000s,

87 The investiture of Nājī l-Shāyif of Dhū Ḥusayn of Dahm as senior shaykh of Bakīl in 1980 is a story in itself. Al-Shāyif was pro-Saudi and closely cooperated with al-Aḥmar and Ṣāliḥ. He had little influence at the grassroots level of Bakīl, thus many suggest that his election served to keep the Bakīl weak and fragmented. On his investiture as senior shaykh of Bakīl in Bi’r al-Mahāshima in al-Jawf, see Dresch 1989: 370–372. In light of the ethnographic present of the 1970s and early 1980s, Dresch regarded al-Shāyif’s investiture as a Saudi attempt “to pull together the disaffected Bakīl tribes” (1989: 370). The further course of events, however, suggests rather the opposite.

88 Bauman 2000.

when Ṣāliḥ's "politics of permanent crisis" began to spin out of control, these heavily armed tribes added to the regime's troubles – sowing Dragon's teeth.

The YAR's legitimacy problem, especially that of the Ṣāliḥ government, became apparent early on. In the early 1980s, there was no ideological consensus in the YAR, no social contract; any legitimacy rested primarily on a sense of "Yemeni nationalism" and opposition to the PDRY.⁸⁹ In the late 1980s 'Abd al-Salām still considered the concept of *mawāṭina* (citizenship) underdeveloped.⁹⁰ Ideological and political programs remained weak and unclear, and the regime was unable (or unwilling) to unify its citizens by fostering structural development, infrastructure, and institution building, all of which would have strengthened its legitimacy. Rather, the regime rested on patrimonial elite rule, headed by Ṣāliḥ himself. In this very respect, the regime resembled the Ḥamīd al-Dīn state of the early twentieth century. Many believed that the change to the system that took place in the 1960s did not constitute a genuine revolution, but simply a change in government carried out by a small group of people.

In this system, *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar represented opposing role models, antipodes, like the obverse and reverse of a coin. Political fortunes and his own superior abilities gave 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar a prominent role in Yemeni politics, which he played in a masterly fashion. On the national stage, as president of the *majlis al-shūrā* (consultative council), al-Aḥmar was as powerful as a shaykh could be, at least beyond the inner echelon of power, which was reserved for Ṣāliḥ and his family. Even if 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar never belonged to this innermost circle, he saw to it that he and his family were well endowed with another form of power, namely wealth from government subsidies, the business activities of his sons (notably Ḥamīd), and lucrative patronage relationships with the Saudis.⁹¹ In tribal terms, the radiance and influence of this ambitious man had its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, when he oversaw a seemingly endless series of tribal mobilizations that helped to tip the scales in the nation's formative struggles: in the 1960s civil war, in the eras of al-Ḥamdī and al-Ghashmī, during the Nasirite coup attempt in 1978, the border war in 1979, and the War of the Central Areas in the early 1980s.

Ambition continually prompted 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar to desire more – much more – than he possessed, and often his ambition seemed to know no bounds.

89 Peterson 1982: 28–29, 68, 126–127.

90 'Abd al-Salām 1988: 3.

91 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar never belonged to the inner circle of power, and after Yemeni unity in 1990 the political ambitions of Ḥusayn and Ḥamīd, two of 'Abdallāh's more prominent sons, brought about a long-standing conflict with President Ṣāliḥ and his family, see Longley Alley 2008: 189–229.

His ingenious political abilities were clear from the way he further diversified his power base and expanded his influence beyond the realm of tribes and politics. In 1979, at the time of the border war with the PDRY, he and other conservatives established the Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya), which consisted of Sunni Islamists (Muslim Brothers and Salafis); they sought to send them into battle against the southern Marxists, whom he loathed and vilified as “atheist anarchists.”⁹² In the case of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, ambition together with his religious zeal, and a combination of tribal, political, and Sunni Islamist religious forces made an ideal power base. Throughout his life he sought to reconcile the post-1962 political empowerment of tribal leaders with deeply held Islamic values (a combination that Zaydism did not offer, as tribal shaykhs could not gain real power and influence during the Imamate).⁹³ With his charisma and influence radiating far beyond his original tribe and confederation, this was also the time when he began to proclaim himself “shaykh of shaykhs of Yemen” (*shaykh mashāyikh al-yaman*), thus claiming seniority over all other shaykhs and tribes of Yemen, including those of Bakīl. Naturally, his bold move antagonized many non-Ḥāshid shaykhs and tribes, who suspected (with good reason) that the true purpose of the Islamic Front was to override tribal affiliations and loyalties and hence weaken tribal cohesion. Aḥmad Ḥaydar, in particular, was determined to prevent ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar from further expanding his influence via Islamism and the Islamic Front.

In the late 1970s, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar began to capitalize on the activities of Sunni Islamists, both Salafis and Muslim Brothers, because the difference between them is political rather than intellectual, and people very easily switch from one side to the other. My father agitated the tribe of Sufyān against them, and no one in Sufyān accepted Sunni Islamism,

92 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 242. On the Islamic Front, see a comprehensive view in al-Ṭawīl 2009. Further information can be found in Dresch 2000: 172–174; Halliday 1985; Burrowes 1987: 101–105, 106, 131; and Gause 1990: 138, 144, 147, 158. Salafi-Wahhabi beliefs were also introduced through Yemeni migrant workers returning from Saudi Arabia, see Weir 2007: 296–303. Other inroads were made via the education system, see Haykel 1999: 196; Weir 2007: 296; Bruck 1998: 150; and Bruck 2017: 253–265. The Islamists constituted a new political force friendly to the Saudis and hostile to the PDRY and its supporters in the north.

93 Until the 1980s, *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the Ḥāshid tribe were affiliated to Zaydism. Although al-Aḥmar began to promote Sunnism for political reasons, privately he seemed to have remained a “Zaydi at heart.” In 1985, he told Gabriele vom Bruck in an interview that he “personally continued to embrace the Zaydi *madhhab* [doctrine] which he considered to be ‘the best’ among all *madhāhib* [doctrines],” see Bruck 2017: 282–283, 331 n. 78.

because it was the ideology of our enemy, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. My father rejected Islamism because he suspected that it would engender a weakening of tribal relations. He was concerned that under the banner of religion, Islamism would entice our tribes away [from us] and transform them into subordinates of al-Aḥmar. My father prevented the spread of Islamism in our area and among our tribe because of this enmity [with *bayt* al-Aḥmar] and not because of religious intolerance (*ta‘ṣṣub madh-habī*). Until today, we are the only tribe among which hardly any trace of Salafism or the Muslim Brotherhood can be found. We are Zaydis. We do not like Sunni Islamists and their fanaticism and their lies. We seek refuge in God from them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, *bayt* Ḥaydar saw all these embryonic vexations of the new age morph into major difficulties, and even more slights were added to those which they had already suffered. A heavy burden settled on *bayt* Ḥaydar, and for all the valour of their tribe it could not be averted or withstood. It could not be helped. At this point in time, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar seemed leagues ahead of Aḥmad Ḥaydar. In their long-term competition, it was no longer Aḥmad Ḥaydar who set the course of events, and his once bold moves were reduced to mere reactions and defensive measures against ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s audacious and visionary steps. His actions were not aimed at asserting his plans, but only at preserving what he had achieved with great effort and sacrifice. Yet Aḥmad Ḥaydar was determined not to give in and to maintain his principles, which were then directly and consciously in conflict with the prevailing system.

My father’s opposition [to the regime] was coupled with a contempt that allowed no compromise. Many shaykhs succumbed to the regime in exchange for personal benefits, which had nothing to do with the interests of their tribes. The tribes of Bakīl loathed those shaykhs who followed Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar. This is evident from the fact that those shaykhs who became wealthy were stigmatized (*maḥrūq*) by the tribes, because their wealth was proof that they had become Ṣāliḥ’s creatures. And there were shaykhs who did not submit to the reigning mendacity, and hence were persecuted by the regime. My father was one of these shaykhs. He had an honourable fighting history (*tārīkh niḍālī sharīf*) and a flawless reputation that had nothing to do with succumbing to Ṣāliḥ in exchange for the accumulation of wealth.

Mahrūq (“stigmatized,” lit., “burnt”) is a notion referring to the moral system of the tribes and its imagery of the “white” and the “black” (*al-abyaḍ wa-l-aswad*) known to all tribes north and east of Sanaa and many Arab tribal societies elsewhere.⁹⁴ These colours refer to moral categories pertaining to the concept of honour (*sharaf*): someone’s honour can be symbolically sullied or “blackened” by dishonourable deeds and “whitened” by honourable acts. Here the notions of “black” and “white” are applied to the concept of tribal leadership: A shaykh who was “burnt” had a mark on his honour, a dark stain that was difficult to remove. The accumulation of personal wealth by a shaykh, wealth that he did not pass on to benefit his tribal community, is considered morally reprehensible. Likewise, in the eyes of the Bakīl, Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s uncompromising political opposition, and his refusal to enter into a patronage relationship with a regime they considered evil, enhanced his honour and reputation.

And because of this position the tribes of Bakīl honour us, because we did not succumb to Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar in exchange for money and personal gains and benefits that had nothing to do with the interests of our tribe. We resisted and rose against them, and in times of conflict our tribe always stood by our side. Many shaykhs submitted to Ṣāliḥ and moved to Sanaa to serve him, far from the home areas of their tribes. These shaykhs are stigmatized (*mahrūq*) among their tribes. But we, thanks be to God, are still at the core of our tribe. We are *bayt* Ḥaydar, we are pure white, we did not yield, neither to Ṣāliḥ nor to al-Aḥmar, albeit this cost us many wars and martyrs.

From the vantage point of the Bakīl, Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s consistent political opposition and his refusal to enter into a patronage relationship with the regime in Sanaa strengthened his reputation among the tribes. ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s cooperation with the increasingly corrupt and kleptocratic Ṣāliḥ regime and the rapacious trading activities of his sons, in contrast, damaged or potentially “blackened” their tribal reputation. This contrast was felt throughout their careers; each family symbolized antagonistic outlooks and divergent role models in navigating the YAR’s political environment. ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar embodied the new times: the shaykh politician, the shaykh entrepreneur, the city shaykh, the government shaykh whose national importance and influence went far beyond the confines of his original tribe. By contrast, Aḥmad Ḥaydar

94 See Dresch 1987a; Dresch 2006: 155, 196, 235. On notions of black and white in customary law elsewhere, see Stewart 2003.

clung to the ideals of equality, autonomy, and opposition, in which honour and status were measured by freedom from domination by or dependency on others.⁹⁵ He never strayed from the path of these convictions, even if it meant being detached from national issues and isolated from many of his peers, whose cooperation with Ṣāliḥ brought them influence.

The Ḥaydar family's position at the heart of highland Yemen's power struggles and their continued opposition to what they perceived as the post-1978 assemblage of "evil politics" came at a heavy price. The tribe of Sufyān suffered from instability, social problems, and ongoing experiences of deprivation that sapped their strength, particularly after the beginning of the blood feud with *bayt* al-Aḥmar in 1981. In our conversation, Mujāhid made clear how heavy a burden it was to oppose the ruling system.

We lived a life of bitterness (*nakd*) and [suffered from] political wars in a tribal guise that consumed all our energy and time and did not leave us room for anything else. We were unable to invest in agriculture, because the wars did not allow us to do real agricultural work. Our men were warriors more than they were farmers, so it was impossible for them to attain prosperity or to bring a semblance of well-being to Sufyān. Even about the issue of our own history we know almost nothing, even though our house is full of large chests packed with old documents and papers. We were better off in the 1970s than in the 1980s, and the 1980s were better than the 1990s, and in this direction things continued to move with the progress of days and years, always from bad to worse because of these evil politics (*siyasiyyat al-'ayn*) that insulted a dear and ancient people (*sha'b 'azīz 'arīq*).

We have seen with an all too clear eye the fragility of everything, the premature deaths, and the sufferings that arise from them. My great-grandfather Ḥaydar and my grandfather Qā'id were both martyred in al-Jawf, the former in Wādī l-Sarīra and the latter in Kharāb al-Marāshī after he killed seven of his assailants; this is a long story that I will relate later at greater length. I saw the Imams' condolence letters among the papers

95 These ideals – that is, autonomy presupposing honour (*sharaf*) – were also observed by Shryock among the Murād tribe: "If a tribesman's mastery over conflict is deemed a by-product of his wealth and coercive might, not his personal 'capacity' or 'efficacy' (*qudrah*), his reputation as a shaykh will never be great," see Shryock 1990: 168, 171. Something similar pertains to the Awlād 'Alī Bedouin in northern Egypt, where autonomy – that is, freedom from domination by or dependency on others – is the standard by which status is measured, see Abu Lughod 1986: 171.

in our house. Shaykhdōm then went to his eldest son, my uncle ‘Abdallāh. When ‘Abdallāh died, [his brother] Ḥaydar became shaykh. And when Ḥaydar died, his brother Aḥmad (my father) became shaykh, because my father was the youngest of the brothers. And later, in 1987, after my three elder brothers and my father were killed, I became the shaykh. And for me, too, fate had few pleasant prospects, for I would escape death and doom only because I decided twice, at the end of bitter struggles, to go into exile.

The [members of] *bayt* Ḥaydar did not enjoy the pleasures of parenthood and childhood, nor the pleasures of being an uncle or an aunt, a brother or a sister. Because of their haste to die, none of them was granted the bliss of a quiet family life. Our people became accustomed to expecting these things [i.e., premature deaths] every day, especially in the era of Ṣāliḥ, may God curse him, because of the many wars and revenge issues. They live in a state of permanent grief. For example, my mother first saw the killing of her brother and her nephew. Then her father and her second brother were killed, then her son Ḥāmis my [full] brother was killed, and then her husband – my father – was killed.⁹⁶ All our women are in this situation and some endure even more than that.

Ṣāliḥ, being a cunning and wily observer and actor, understood the situation fairly well, yet he would never work to establish stability and peace, just as he never attempted to reconcile these two prominent families whose conflict had the proven potential to destabilize highland Yemen. On the contrary, he closely monitored and often encouraged the further evolution of their enmity. These two families possessed a singular importance for his plans. *Bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar were as different as day and night, role models of two utterly divergent political outlooks and visions of tribal leadership, and yet they were bound together by shared borders, a common history, a tribal background, and rancorous competition. The day would come, Ṣāliḥ supposed, when the antagonism between them would be of use to him, and when he would be able to turn their rivalry to good account. Until then, he remained in the background, administering and orchestrating their conflict without exposing himself in person, pulling the strings and entangling them as he pleased, and playing the most attractive of all games: the great game of politics.

96 Ḥasan and Ḥaydar were Mujāhid's half brothers.

The Serpent with the Many Heads (1981–1987)

وكل هذه العداوة تجمع من عدات أشياء. في العهد القديم كنا خصوم. في العهد
الجديد بداء بإخواني وأبي

All this enmity resulted from a confluence of issues. In the old era we were adversaries. [The blood feud] began in the new era, with [the deaths of] my brothers and my father.



Pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk: Dhū ‘Aybān,* Dhū Shirārī,* Muṣliḥ Shirārī,* ‘Abdallāh Shirārī,* ‘Alī Sa’d.*

The tectonic shifts of the 1970s were only the beginning of even greater tribulations. In the early 1980s, the rivalry between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar assumed the character of a blood feud; a feud that was rooted in an ancient struggle for predominance and that would have led to the extinction of Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s entire offspring if he had not had the foresight to evacuate his two youngest sons – Mujāhid and Fayṣal – from Sufyān to al-Jawf. Writing about the 1980s, the reconstruction of the feuding context sheds light on the political antagonisms extant in highland Yemen, and how the “background” theme of “tribal” violence was linked to national and regional politics.

Northern Yemen in the 1980s was a little documented period marked by the consolidation of Ṣāliḥ’s rule and cautious rapprochement between the sister states of the YAR and PDRY. Both of these processes involved many risks and uncertain returns. After Ṣāliḥ managed to withstand (or, more precisely, survive) the ordeals of his first years in office – the 1978 Nasirite coup attempt and the catastrophic 1979 border war with the PDRY, followed by the War of the Central Areas with the Aden-sponsored National Democratic Front (NDF) – he set out to consolidate and strengthen his rule. These were not easy tasks, since he had inherited the precarious constitutional framework of the al-Ḥamdī era and large parts of the north were still beyond the control of the state. In 1980 he chose to formulate the national charter (*al-mithāq al-waṭanī*) and create a National Dialogue Committee, followed, in 1982, by the first assembly of the

General People's Congress (GPC), an umbrella organization that sought to represent all political and tribal interests and that evolved into Northern Yemen's unity party.¹ Relations with the PDRY gradually began to stabilize. The accession of Chairman 'Alī Nāṣir Muḥammad in 1979 led to improved relations between Sanaa and Aden, as both sides worked to build confidence.² The period from 1981 to 1988 has been called the "third phase" of unity efforts: unification was not yet considered an immediate issue, rather it was the aim was to normalize relationships and avoid another disastrous confrontation like the 1979 border war between the sister states.³

Ṣāliḥ's greatest challenge in the early 1980s remained the conflict with the NDF, which had rallied a large part of the political anti-Ṣāliḥ forces and dissident shaykhs to its side. Despite (or, because of) the improvement in relations between Sanaa and Aden, relations between Sanaa and the NDF had deteriorated since the NDF suspected (with good reason) that 'Alī Nāṣir might attempt to limit its political and military leeway. Sanaa, for its part, was inclined to believe that the PDRY under 'Alī Nāṣir would not intervene to protect the NDF against the northern security forces.⁴ From summer 1980 there was sporadic fighting involving NDF insurgents and both YAR armed forces and tribal irregulars. These irregulars were mainly composed of tribesmen aligned with *bayt* al-Aḥmar and fighting under the banner of the year-old Islamic Front, which had been established in 1979 by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar with Saudi support, at the time of the border war with the PDRY, and which were now thrown into the guerrilla war with the NDF.⁵ The Saudis (backed by the United States) strongly supported the conservative Islamist group around al-Aḥmar and their insistence that President Ṣāliḥ deal sternly with the NDF and the PDRY, both of whom were supported by the Soviets. Most of the fighting took place in the "central areas" around Ibb, but also in tribal areas north of Sanaa where dissatisfaction with Ṣāliḥ and his regime was particularly strong and which thus gravitated towards the NDF. The tribes and shaykhs of Bakīl, in particular,

1 On the national charter and the National Dialogue Conference of the 1980s, see Burrowes 1987: 111–113; Dresch 1989: 238, 239, 395–396; and Dresch 2000: 154, 156, 160, 174.

2 The discovery of considerable quantities of oil in the common borderlands was another reason for the cautious process of rapprochement between the YAR and PDRY; see 'Abd al-Salām 1988: 179–185, 195–203; Dunbar 1992: 467; Dresch 2000: 160–163; and Day 2012: 104.

3 Dunbar 1992: 458.

4 Burrowes 1987: 102–103.

5 The Islamic Front was a paramilitary group largely consisting of Sunni radicals; see chapter 1. However, not all tribal groups that helped confront the NDF were related to the Sunni Islamist spectrum. A case in point are the Munabbih of Khawlān b. 'Āmir in western Ṣa'da governorate; they used to assist state forces against the NDF, see Gingrich 2011: 43.

remained an uncertain factor because they considered themselves disenfranchised and disadvantaged in the increasingly Ḥāshid-dominated republic. The confrontations developed into heavy combat, and the decisive battle between the regime and the NDF was fought in the second half of 1981.

This is the historical context in which the rivalry between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar developed into a full out blood feud. Their long-standing struggle for leadership, hegemony, and territory meant that both families positioned themselves at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s stellar political ascent; he rose from the Saudis’ antagonist to one of their closest partners. Aḥmad Ḥaydar, by contrast, allied himself with ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s nemesis Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī and, after al-Ḥamdī’s murder in 1978, with the NDF, with the aim of curbing Ḥāshid influence in Yemen’s north and overthrowing the Ṣāliḥ regime. After al-Ḥamdī’s death he rallied the Bakīl for the battle at Jabal Aswad. His firstborn son, Ḥaydar, was field commander of the NDF in Sufyān. In the early 1980s, there was reason to fear that *bayt* Ḥaydar would again set out to rally the tribes to frustrate the regime’s designs. For Aḥmad Ḥaydar had but one desire – to repress the advancement of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s Islamist project and hegemonial aspirations; whereas ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar had but one goal – to make Ḥāshid and radical Sunnism dominant forces in highland Yemen.

The tribal, political, and sectarian hassles spearheaded by *bayt* al-Aḥmar and *bayt* Ḥaydar continued to cause problems on the arterial highway where it straddled Sufyān – the vital and only viable overland route that connected the Yemeni capital with the northern power centre Ṣa’dā and the mighty and influential Saudi neighbour to the north. Aḥmad Ḥaydar was perfectly aware of the power he wielded with his well-proven ability to block this road and hence interfere with the communication between central Yemen and the Saudis in the north. He was well served by his sentries, who kept watch day and night, and promptly informed him of any movements by his opponents, so he could hasten to block the critical bottleneck of al-Mudarrij. At that time, the only alternative land route to Saudi Arabia was on dirt tracks across the unstable al-Jawf province, a route that involved a gruelling drive over rugged country where vehicles bumped agonizingly over hard volcanic rock, ran the risk of becoming bogged down in sand dunes, and were often forced to return to Sanaa altogether.⁶ These mortifications were no small thing for a man like

6 In the early 1980s, there was no other viable alternative to the Sanaa-Ṣa’dā highway. In the west, the Tihāma route north of Ḥaraḍ was still poorly constructed, some sections were extremely steep and winding and passed through mountainous regions, making it equally susceptible to ambushes.

‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar to face. In his view, the harassment and provocations of *bayt* Ḥaydar had increased to an intolerable extent. The time came when he was powerful enough to strike down his hereditary foe; at this point the latent conflict between them became violent.⁷

In the conflict between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar the tactical approaches of the two sides differed significantly, rendering the emerging feud between them a kind of asymmetric engagement. With the first murder related to this feud in 1981 (Ḥasan Ḥaydar was killed near Ḥūth), *bayt* Ḥaydar set out to pursue a strategy of vengeance in accordance with tribal rules and customs. *Bayt* al-Aḥmar, in contrast, did not appear on the scene, rather they acted via proxies, in order to minimize the costs of feuding for themselves and maximize the damage for the enemy. The sequences of this asymmetric engagement, manoeuvres, counter-manoevres, and machinations made for an exciting drama, but one that was morally repulsive given the amount of collateral damage and the use of excessive force. For *bayt* Ḥaydar, the consequences of this feud by surrogates pursued by *bayt* al-Aḥmar were devastating. As a result, *bayt* Ḥaydar and the tribe of Sufyān became bogged down in internal feuding as one tribal segment turned against the other and parts of Sufyān were rent asunder by antagonistic passions. It took seven years – until the “equation change” of 1987 – before the enemies confronted each other face to face.

Throughout this initial phase, Ṣāliḥ’s position remained profoundly ambivalent – towards the PDRY and the NDF, but also towards *bayt* al-Aḥmar and *bayt* Ḥaydar and the deadly enmity that evolved between them. Unlike ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, Ṣāliḥ had no sectarian and political convictions. What mattered to him was retaining power through diplomacy and manipulation, the art of combination. He took pleasure in these activities that mattered more to him than political principles, ideologies, and creed. During the war with the NDF, he continued to play the Saudis and Soviets against each other.⁸ While his generals and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s Islamic Front were at war with the NDF, Ṣāliḥ held secret negotiations with Aden, and in this way he intensified the disconcertment, irritation, and rivalries among his friends and foes in northern

7 Punitive campaigns against dissident shaykhs and those close to the NDF were common at that time, see Dresch 2000: 152 for the murder of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Ḍumaynī in 1980, and Abū Laḥūm (2004: vol. 3: 270) for the military campaign against Muḥsin Abū Nuṣṭān of Arḥab in 1979.

8 Against the will of the Saudis (who were backed by the United States), in summer 1979 Ṣāliḥ concluded a large weapons deal with the Soviets, who in return demanded a political solution to the NDF rebellion, see Van Hollen 1982: 139; Halliday 1985: 8–9; Halliday 1990: 131; Burrowes 1987: 105; and CIA 1981: 8. It was only with this weapons deal that Ṣāliḥ succeeded in modernizing the YAR’s military and defeating the NDF in 1982.

Yemen and the wider region.⁹ Šāliḥ's double-dealings and his ostensible "lack of a clear vision for North Yemen"¹⁰ reveal the basic features of what became his style of governance, one based on bringing as many enemies and challenges as possible on board, to provide him a broader power base and enable him to govern more independently of the various factions – factions that at best weakened and neutralized themselves in internal feuds. On the national level, and in spite of the war with the NDF, the dominant theme of the 1980s remained reconciliation based on the principles of the national charter, and Šāliḥ worked to persuade opposition elements to join the National Dialogue Conference (Mu'tamar al-Ḥiwār al-Waṭanī) and return to the political fold, preferably that of the GPC.

1 The Imperatives of Vengeance

Due to the confluence of tribal and political features, the feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the subject of this chapter, cannot be considered a textbook example of tribal feuding. And yet it evolved out of a tribal matrix, and tribal customs and traditions determined many of its features.¹¹ In the tribal societies of Yemen, as in many other tribal societies in the Middle East, blood vengeance is an honour-bound concept; honour typically becomes a moral value of paramount importance in societies that are characterized by

9 The secret negotiations between Sanaa and the NDF, and any possible political concessions to the NDF resulting from it, put a strain on Šāliḥ's relation with the Saudis (plus their US patrons). 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and the Islamic Front, and the political centre of the YAR, all remained fearful that Šāliḥ might choose or be forced to swing to the left in his ongoing negotiations with PDRY and NDF, see Burrowes 1987: 105–106; and Halliday 1990: 128. Šāliḥ, for his part, still needed the support of Saudi Arabia, the political centre, and the major shaykhs for his political survival, but did not want to return to the humiliating situation of the early 1970s, when the shaykhs were in control of the state and the Saudis treated Yemen as a "virtual dependency," see Burrowes 1987: 98. Because of Šāliḥ's double-dealings in the war with the NDF, relations with the Saudis temporarily deteriorated. Šāliḥ himself dismissed the weapons deal with the Soviets as a mere "diversification of sources of arms," see Burrowes 1987: 106.

10 This is how a CIA report on these events put it. In the same report, US observers noted that "the most likely eventuality is that Šāliḥ will simply try to muddle along as he has over the past years," see CIA 1981: 10.

11 This section is a summary of some key features of blood revenge in Yemen. The following elaborations are mainly based on Abū Ghānim (1985: 251–298), al-'Alimī's (1988: 69–76) "overview," and the English-language studies by Dresch 1989: 38–116 passim and Weir 2007: 209–212. On blood revenge in contemporary Yemen, see also Brandt 2021.

weak or absent state powers.¹² The honour of an individual is simultaneously part of the collective honour of the family and the tribe, and blood vengeance is a response to its perceived violation (subsumed by the term *ʿayb*, lit., disgrace). The infringement of honour requires material or physical compensation to restore balance (*mīzān*) between the individuals or groups involved. Blood vengeance (*thaʿr*) becomes the means to repair a breach of the moral order and is a reaction to particularly repulsive, “unforgivable” offences, such as wilful murder. Blood vengeance is considered the ultimate means, as tribal customs and traditions generally tend to settle cases involving homicide and thus restore balance through material compensation paid by the killer or his group to the victim’s group; this is the payment of blood money (*diya*).¹³

Yemeni customary law classifies homicide into a number of categories – in most but not all cases there are three – that depend on the types of disgrace (*ʿayb*) exhibited by the homicide. The different types of *ʿayb* are assigned colours (white, red, black, sometimes yellow) that determine the gravity of the infringement: white *ʿayb* designates the least severe form of homicide, black *ʿayb* its most morally reprehensible form.¹⁴ A “white disgrace” (*ʿayb abyad*) is usually associated with accidental killing (*qatl khaṭa*). This can be an unintentional homicide such as a traffic accident, but also homicide during a war (that is, in a situation in which those involved know that it will be necessary, and quite legitimate, to kill people). A killing classified as a white *ʿayb* usually requires the culprit to pay one single unit of blood money (*diya*) to the family of the victim. In many cases of a white *ʿayb* – a tragic, unintentional accident, for example – tribal custom encourages a further reduction or even repeal of the penalty.

The opposite end of the spectrum is wilful or deliberate killing (*qatl ʿamd*) that falls into the category of a “black disgrace” (*ʿayb aswad*). Murder (*qatl nakīr*) is considered the most reprehensible type of killing, especially if it also features aspects of treachery (*khiyāna*) and betrayal (*ghadr*), such as the wilful murder of a person that belongs to a group that enjoys special protection among the tribes (a guest, a tribal protégé, a woman, a child, a fellow traveller, or a sayyid with *hijra* protection), since the imperatives of protection have a

12 On tribal concepts of honour (*sharaf*) in Yemen, see Adra 1982: 142–144; Dresch 1989: 38–74; and Weir 2007: 49–51. For North Africa, Bourdieu (1979) and Jamous (1991) conceptualize honour as a socio-cultural value.

13 *Diya* sums are usually quite substantial. Mujāhid likened the imposition of multiple *diyas* to “financial imprisonment.”

14 On the notions of “black” and “white” in the moral system of Yemen’s tribal societies, see also Dresch 1987a and chapter 1 of the present book.

central place in tribal law in Yemen.¹⁵ The killing of a mediator, arbitrator, or guarantor during a truce or during a process of mediation or arbitration is considered a black *ʿayb*. In addition to deliberate killings, those that take place in special protected places, such as public streets, markets, *hijras* or places where customary law is dispensed (places that are considered “neutral” zones, namely *manāṭiq muḥāyyida*, whose inviolability is in the public interest) are also included under this category. A black *ʿayb* also includes particularly heinous crimes, such as looting with murder, armed robbery with murder, concealing a crime by burning or hiding the victim or destroying evidence, and so on. Each aspect of a black *ʿayb* in a homicide requires the payment of eleven-fold *diyas* by the murderer or his kin to the slain person’s group in order to avert the killing of the murderer in return. The rule of eleven-fold multiplication for the *diyas* is called *ḥukm al-muḥaddash*.¹⁶ The relatives of the slain are entitled to refuse financial compensation and demand the killing of the killer, that is, blood compensation.

The determination of the vengeance groups – that is, the groups responsible for exacting revenge or raising the blood money – is a classic question for anthropologists of the Middle East.¹⁷ Most often, the responsibility for the duty of exacting vengeance on the murderer falls on the close agnatic kin of the slain, but the communities to which the two parties belong are also, in one way or another, involved in the process. The composition of the vengeance groups (*awliyāʾ al-dam*, lit., “custodians of the blood”) varies greatly, and the Ḥaydar case in particular provides a good example of the difficulty in defining vengeance groups. In the narrative at hand it is often only possible to determine who became active in the acts of revenge by reconstructing it from the context. So identifying the term “we” (*naḥnu*) in Mujāhid’s discourse embraces the members of *bayt* Ḥaydar, the Dhū Aḥmad, the moiety of Ruhm, the tribe of Sufyān, the confederation of Bakīl – all those groups enumerated here in the nested hierarchy of tribal segmentation, might be referred to as “we” and might be mobilized in different stages of the feud. Mujāhid often referred to this group, which was mobilized in a feud (or any other) campaign, as a *qawm*: a group of men mobilized from among different tribal segments (most often from among the Ruhm moiety) for a certain purpose.¹⁸ The determination of the vengeance

15 Dresch 2015: 60–65 and Dresch 2021: 57–59.

16 The original expression is probably *ḥukm al-aḥad ʿashr* (lit. “the rule of the eleven”) which would have evolved into *ḥukm al-muḥadaʾsh* or *ḥukm al-muḥaddash*.

17 On the composition of vengeance groups see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1940: 139–248; Peters 1967; Hartley 1961: 174–182; and Dresch 1989: 75–88.

18 In the Ḥaydar case, territoriality as well as aspects of genealogy and kinship (i.e., tribal belonging) determine the composition of vengeance groups. The situation in Sufyān is

groups becomes even more complicated if one takes into account that the principals were not the killers, and that the revenge was repeatedly diverted to uninvolved people who were drawn into the feud out of political considerations or tactical calculations.

The actual practices and rules observed on the ground differ from region to region, and even from tribe to tribe. It is safe to say that tribal customs and traditions strongly prioritize the peaceful settlement of conflicts through mediation that leads to compensation. The feuding context in Sufyān, had a special feature: a custom that might be called the “imperative of vengeance,” since in the case of murder, classified by tribal law as a black *‘ayb*, the Sufyān strongly opt against *diya* solutions and insist on settling scores and restoring balance by “blood taking.” This particularity was also observed by Faḍl Abū Ghānim, who found that “among the tribe of Sufyān, tribal law states in the case of a black *‘ayb* killing the ‘provision of the killer’s head’ (*taqdīm ra’s al-qātil fi l-naqā’ wa-l-‘ayb*) plus an amount of money payable by the offender to the family of the killed.”¹⁹ The eventual settlement of a homicide case through the acceptance of blood money is considered a double disgrace for the kin group of the victim: on the one hand there was an infringement against their honour in the initial crime, and on the other hand, their inability or unwillingness to actively restore their honour.²⁰ The Sufyān equate accepting blood money with “blood trade” (*tijārat al-dam*) and “accepting disgrace” (*akhdh al-‘ayb*). Mujāhid explained that, informed by notions of honour prevailing in Sufyān, a tribesman will only accept material compensation in addition to exacting revenge.

Our custom toward unintentional killing is to forgive, no matter whether the killing is by gunfire or a traffic accident, because the killing is not intentional. The culprit comes to surrender, he and his relatives and a number of tribal notables (*wijhā’*) [come], then a number of sheep and cows are slaughtered for the relatives of the slain, who then feel sorry for the culprit and forgive him. If the children of the victim are destitute and do not possess anything, the *wijhā’* decide on a certain amount to

therefore different from some neighbouring tribal societies, where territoriality takes precedence over genealogy, cf. Varisco 2017: 231.

19 Abū Ghānim 1985: 285.

20 There is much ambivalence about the morality of blood revenge. A national study of the phenomenon of blood revenge in contemporary Yemen concluded that, on one hand, Yemenis see revenge as an evil, but on the other hand, they glorify and heroize the avenger and attribute an inferior status to one who “has a vengeance that he has not taken,” see ‘Umar 2004: 169.

be paid by the culprit to the children of the slain. [In the case of wilful murder,] there are tribes who agree with solutions that pay them millions [of Yemeni riyals] in order to distance themselves from the evil [of vengeance]. But among us, the Sufyān, it is customary that we accept the shame and the disgrace only after we have taken full revenge (*mā nākhudh al-ʿawr wa-l-ʿyūb illā baʿd akhdh kāmīl al-tharʿ*). We cannot accept blood money until after purity (*naqāʿ*) [is established]. Purity means taking revenge. We can kill or forgive, that is our right and decision, but we do not follow the example of other tribes who prefer to accept the disgrace [by accepting blood money] rather than taking revenge.

The Sufyān earned their reputation of being a “grim lot” thanks to their occasional inclinations to hard-line interpretations of tribal law. For example, after the assassination of Aḥmad Ḥaydar in 1987, the infuriated members of his tribe threatened to apply an ultra hard-line interpretation of tribal law by determining the sum of black disgrace suffered with a corresponding (that is, elevenfold multiplication) number of human lives, hence to calculate the blood debt with the equation: *x black disgraces suffered = taking x-11 human lives* of the slayer’s group. This was a gross bending of tribal law, tantamount to a declaration of war.²¹ In order to restore their honour, the Sufyān exaggerated the case, knowing only too well that they were in fact risking the possibility of reaching a balanced degree of violence. It remains unclear whether this hard-line, if not borderline, interpretation of tribal law was a declaration of true intent or martial talk – ultimately it was not implemented. In any case, their interpretation of tribal law ran counter to tribal values and good practice, which strongly condemn pushing violence too far but rather opt for mediation, and, in the case of murder, financial compensation through *diya* solutions.

The determination of guilt according to the local interpretation of tribal law is followed by the implementation of the vengeance. In the present tale of feud, the course of the vengeance process shows a frequently recurring pattern. A team of snipers would be set up and scouts dispatched to track down

21 Yemeni experts on customary law from other tribes, with whom I discussed this case, vehemently denied the rightfulness of equating the number of disgraces suffered with taking a corresponding number of human lives. Hartley (1961: 180), however, observed a similar practice in the Ḥaḍramawt in the 1950s, where a killing involving black *ʿayb* called for at least two killings in return or a double *diya*. Stevenson (1985: 49) reports a case in the history of ʿAmrān city, in which one death led to the killing of seventy-one people in response. Similar cases are documented for Albania; Schwandner-Sievers (1995: 123) quotes one of her Albanian interviewees: “If they kill one of us we will kill 10 of them.” This shows that the calculation of violence can become quite unbalanced.

the culprit or one of his close agnates, then the avengers, under the cover of darkness, set up an ambush or a kind of trap in which they lay in wait for the culprit, who usually appears at dawn, and is killed in an ambush. Vengeance – in Sufyān, at least – is not conceived as an open fight between equal fighters. Rather, the avengers hunt the culprit like an animal.

In the custom of tribal revenge, the avengers secretly stalk the culprit until the right time comes to kill him. Then the avengers appear and kill the culprit. If the avengers do not hide themselves in a place near the culprit, they will not succeed. For if the culprit discovers the avengers, he would escape and disappear from their view. And caution, when the avengers shoot at the culprit, the culprit and his men might strike back! They might precede the avengers and attack them, and the avengers fail to take their revenge.

To be chased is shameful for the culprit. Because he is forced to hide, he is always obsessed by dread of the avengers, like an animal that is always obsessed with the fear of humans. All his movements become extremely secretive and cautious. Many dare to venture outside their houses only in the company of women and children, because tribal custom prohibits the targeting of those who are accompanied by the vulnerable and the weak. Accompanied by women and children, the culprit would walk in front of the eyes of the avengers. The avengers would not shoot him, out of deference to the women and the children.... It is embarrassing if we become exhausted finding an opportunity to kill the culprit. Sometimes we do twenty raids in order to hunt him down, and we get him only in raid number twenty. Vengeance should be swift, precise, and effortless. It is not just the act, the killing; it is the style as well. For indeed we are always being watched, there are always many witnesses.

For the culprit, becoming the target of revenge means being exposed to a two-fold disgrace; first, they are in the humiliating situation of needing protection, and second, they experience the shame of living a life in constant, animal-like fear. The culprit can only move with a degree of safety outside his house if he is accompanied by women and children, because tribal law prohibits the targeting of persons accompanied by those considered “weak.” Men who boast of being the protectors of women, children, and the weak find themselves under the “protection” of the latter. This is a severe blow to a tribesman’s prestige and honour, which rest on his being “noble, strong, and able to protect.”²²

22 Serjeant 1977: 227; and Dresch 1989: 53–58.

After the execution of the act of vengeance, when death has paid for death, the original victim is considered avenged.

Among our tribe, after the restoration of balance, it is customary for the relatives and the fellow tribesmen of the person who has been avenged to await the avengers at his grave. The avengers shoot over the grave and place two stones on it, in order to show that justice has been done and that the person has been avenged. After the shooting over the grave, the relatives of the avenged person host a large lunch to honour the avengers. On the second day, the senior shaykh of the tribe offers his hospitality to the avengers. In turn the avengers are invited every day for lunch at the hospitality of each shaykh and each *ʿāqil* until the last *ʿāqil* of the tribe. The hospitality offered by the representatives of the tribe is a sign of appreciation for and recognition of the avengers, who endured the hardship and peril of taking revenge. This is to encourage the other members of the tribe to emulate their heroism.

2 Ḥasan Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar (1981)

In the early 1980s, dissension and discord in northern Yemen were at their height. The conflict between the regime in Sanaa and the NDF was increasing. Secret cleavages and rivalries pervaded Ṣāliḥ's realm. While Lower Yemen was in turmoil, in highland Yemen the shaykhs had conflicting aims, and antagonism on the part of regional powers used the YAR as a pawn in their hegemonial games. In the looming and decisive battle between the regime and the NDF, the tribes aligned themselves with each side: ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar and the Islamic Front spearheaded the fight against the NDF, Aḥmad Ḥaydar being one of the NDF's principal supporters. At this juncture, the long-standing rivalry between the two families became violent.

The gory tale of murderous ambition set in rather innocuously, with an ordinary petty feud between two tribal segments that, in and of itself, bore little relation to the political antagonisms of that time. It began in the early 1980s, probably in late 1980 or early 1981, when the Dhū Shirārī* of Ḥāshid killed a tribesman of the Dhū Shahwān of Sufyān in what seems to have been a border hassle between the two tribal segments. In turn Muṣliḥ al-Shahwānī, the Dhū Shahwān's shaykh, took revenge on his tribesman's death by killing Muṣliḥ Shirārī,* the Dhū Shirārī's* shaykh.

A Ḥāshid shaykh named Muṣliḥ Shirārī* was killed by a Sufyān shaykh named Muṣliḥ al-Shahwānī in blood revenge, because this Shirārī* had killed one of the tribesmen of the Dhū Shahwān. The villages of each shaykh are located on the border between Ḥāshid and Sufyān. By killing Muṣliḥ Shirārī*, Muṣliḥ al-Shahwānī had taken revenge for his tribesman's death, and normally this would have ended the case.

However, after the killing of Muṣliḥ Shirārī*, the Ḥāshid gathered in the mansion of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar in al-Khamrī and discussed the matter. Some argued that Shaykh al-Shahwānī, when he took revenge, overstepped the mark in killing Shaykh Shirārī*, for he did not kill an ordinary tribesman in retaliation for the death of his [ordinary] tribesman, but rather killed a shaykh. Others took the view that this case had come to an end, because justice had been done, and parity had been restored by killing "one for one" (*wāḥid fī wāḥid*). Yet the kinsmen of Muṣliḥ Shirārī* rejected this opinion and insisted that the Dhū Shahwān tribesman who was killed had been an ordinary person and hence al-Shahwānī should have killed an ordinary person from among the Dhū Shirārī*, rather than their shaykh, that parity (*musāwā*) had not been restored, and that they would take revenge and kill Shaykh al-Shahwānī in retaliation.

How did you know about the discussion in 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's mansion?

Tribal meetings and what goes on in the *dīwān* of a shaykh are not confidential, they are public issues, and what is discussed in them is known because they are open to everyone, and young and old attend them. Of course we had our confidants in these meetings, as al-Aḥmar had his confidants placed in our meetings, and the news of what was discussed in the meeting in al-Aḥmar's *dīwān* reached us in full detail.

From the point of view of the Dhū Shirārī*, the revenge killing exacted by the Dhū Shahwān had not restored the balance between the groups involved, because some refused to recognize parity. Rather they believed that by killing their shaykh, the Dhū Shahwān had unduly escalated the matter, and that their revenge did not solve, but in fact further aggravated, the case: an "exchange of harms" with its inherent tendency to escalate had been set in motion.²³

At this point politics began to play a role. According the Sufyānī version, some Ḥāshid leaders and 'Abdallāh Shirārī* (the son of the killed shaykh Muṣliḥ Shirārī*) further discussed the matter behind closed doors. Clearly, no one can

23 According to Sahlins (1965), "negative reciprocity," or the "exchange of harms," entails an exchange of harmful actions that tends to escalate.

say with certainty who was present and what was discussed between them, but in hindsight the Sufyān were able to guess where the collusion began; that is, the issue of revenge was manipulated to the detriment of the Sufyān and *bayt* Ḥaydar, for they believed that ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar sustained ‘Abdallāh Shirārī’s* belief that balance could only be restored by killing a shaykh of the Sufyān, since only the death of a peer (*nidd*) would restore parity and satisfy the Dhū Shirārī’s* honour.

After the public meeting in the *dīwān*, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar met privately with ‘Abdallāh Shirārī.* We believe ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar told ‘Abdallāh Shirārī,* “You should indeed kill a Sufyān shaykh for your father the shaykh. But do not kill Shaykh al-Shahwānī. Kill Ibn Ḥaydar, our enemy, Sufyān’s senior shaykh, or one of his sons.” Hence, the assassination would look like a tribal revenge issue, and would not revert to our true enemy, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, and the matter would thus work out in its own, tribal way. And after some time they got to my brother Ḥasan in Ḥūth and killed him. This was a political manoeuvre serving the agenda of al-Aḥmar against my father under the guise of a tribal feud.

The Sufyān believe that *bayt* al-Aḥmar had no right to alter the direction of ‘Abdallāh Shirārī’s* retributive thrust in such an arbitrary manner, and that the secrecy in which the machinations concerning this revenge issue were shrouded was itself a sign of dishonourable dealings. Indeed the Dhū Shahwān no longer played a role in the process of this feud. However, shortly thereafter ‘Abdallāh Shirārī* reappeared, along with two other Ḥāshid tribesmen, and murdered Ḥasan Ḥaydar, one of Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s sons. Hence the retributive thrust of *bayt* Shirārī* had been redirected from *bayt* al-Shahwānī to *bayt* Ḥaydar; the petty feud between two uninvolved tribal segments “shifted register” (as linguists would say) and was channelled into trajectories of political conflict of that time. *Bayt* al-Aḥmar, as the suspected driving force behind this operation, allowed matters to take their course. Ḥasan, one of the younger sons of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, became the first in a macabre procession of those who perished in this feud.

Early one morning Ḥasan was driving on the public highway from Rayda via Ḥūth to Sufyān.²⁴ Upon his arrival in Ḥūth, he found his way barred

24 It is not uncommon for teenagers of that age to drive a car in Yemen. As soon as a child can look over the steering wheel, she or he can drive a car.

by a roadblock erected by al-ʿUṣaymāt tribesmen in the centre of the city. They asked him, “Are you the son of Shaykh Aḥmad Ḥaydar?” He answered, “Yes.” They asked, “Do you allow these three people to get in your car and [you can] let them off at their villages?” Ḥasan said, “Yes, welcome, get in.” The three men entered his car. North of Ḥūth, the road leads through a mountainous area, where the men asked my brother to stop on the grounds that they had reached their home area. After they got out of Ḥasan’s car, they opened fire on him and killed him. The car rolled down a slope and came to a stop at a boulder. The killers fled. Ḥasan had been young; he had not yet reached maturity. He was around thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen-years-old.

How did you know how Ḥasan had been killed?

There was another fellow traveller, an old man who wanted to reach his home village, and my brother gave him a lift. They had gotten into his car together at the roadblock in Ḥūth. In the mountains, they told the old man to get out with them. After they had left the car, they shot my brother.

Why didn’t they kill the witness, too, to make certain he would not testify against them?

They knew that they would be unable to conceal the crime, because they had asked my brother to take them with him in the centre of Ḥūth city before the eyes of many bystanders.

Who found Ḥasan?

Ḥasan’s body arrived in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a at nightfall. Some of our tribesmen had been in Ḥūth when news came of a shootout on the mountain road. They went to the place and after some searching they found my brother in the car behind the boulders. The car with his corpse had been exposed to the full sun from morning to the evening.

I remember I was a child playing in the courtyard of our house in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a when they brought Ḥasan’s body. I recall that my father, may God have mercy on him, was chewing *qāt* in the *dīwān* on the third floor of our house and with him were many *ʿuqqāl* and guests chewing in the *dīwāns* on the first and second floor. A car arrived in our courtyard and stopped in front of our house. All at once there was a loud noise. Men shouted [so loudly] that it was heard all over the village and my father, hastening from the *dīwān*, rushed to the window to see what was amiss. They shouted, “This is your son, Ḥashid has killed him, come and see!” And then all of them, inside and outside the house, interrupted one another, shouting. But they could not induce my father to go down to the yard. Instead he sat

down again and continued to talk to the *‘uqqāl*. He only said, “Take him and bury him, and his mother will mourn him.”

Everyone was blindsided by the arrival of Ḥasan’s body, may God have mercy on him. The *‘uqqāl* went down to see the body. I was a child, I had been playing in the yard, I climbed on the truck bed and saw the body of my brother on a tarpaulin, I saw the bullet wounds scattered over his head and torso, more than twenty bullets. I saw the bodies of all my brothers, and their ghastly gunshot wounds, may God have mercy on them. Our tribesmen were furious about the crime, and they were outraged by my father’s demonstrative composure (*burūda*). In their frenzy, they wanted an immediate attack on Ḥāshid and [wanted to] kill whomever they found that same night. But my father prevented them from doing so.

Why his stoic calm?

We did not know.

He might have expected that something like this would happen.

Absolutely, he had expected it! He handled the situation with strange sangfroid that was motivated by his pride (*kibriyya*). Because he said, “Take him and bury him, and his mother will mourn him.” When they brought Ḥasan, my father was in his *dīwān*, surrounded by many people, and he wanted to send a message to his enemies, to show them that they cannot break him, that he is strong, that he is resilient to misfortune, and that this criminal act would not break him, that the enemy would not break him, whatever they did to him. My father was known for the strength of his feelings; when he loved, he loved with all his heart. When he hated, he was a mighty challenge.

The same night, and illuminated by the light of torches, crowds of tribesmen carried Ḥasan’s mutilated body to the graveyard of Jassār near Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a.

Jassār is a new graveyard that was set up for my brothers and my father and our relatives. Our ancestors were buried where they were killed.²⁵ My grandfather Qā’id, may God rest his soul, was buried in Kharāb al-Marāshī [in al-Jawf]. The father of my grandfather, Ḥaydar, was killed and buried in Wādī Sarīra [in al-Jawf]. There were no means of transportation [then], and they were buried where they died.

25 The custom of burying an individual in the same place he dies is consistent with the *ḥadīth*.

Only Aḥmad Ḥaydar refused to attend the funeral of his son. His refusal did not arise from lack of grief and affection; on the contrary, it was from his firm conviction that any public display of grief and despair would play into the hands of his enemies, for there were always people reporting to his enemies, there were always witnesses. By refusing to attend his son's funeral, he delivered a clear signal that he would not bow down before those who considered themselves powerful. Indeed, his calmness and demonstrative refusal should have been even more alarming to his enemies than the more demonstrative reaction would have been.

After Ḥasan's funeral, the tribe of Sufyān took stock. According to their legal interpretation, the assessment of Ḥasan Ḥaydar's murder was as follows.

According to customary law, there are five aspects of black *ʿayb* in the killing of my brother Ḥasan. The first black *ʿayb* is killing him without reason (*qatl bidūn sabab*). The second black *ʿayb* is killing an adolescent (*qatl walad*). The third black *ʿayb* is killing a fellow traveller (*qatl al-sīra*), because those who killed him were passengers in the same car. The fourth black *ʿayb* is killing him on a public road (*qatl fī ṭarīq ʿamm*). The fifth black *ʿayb* is that they wilfully exposed his corpse to the full sun (*tashmīs al-maqtūl*) for hours, until the evening, and no one knew about it.

All of these features of black *ʿayb* were punishable by eleven-fold penalties (*bi-l-muḥaddash*). The Sufyān were particularly outraged by the last, fifth aspect of black *ʿayb*: the abandonment of the corpse in the wilderness and its long exposure to the sun. Under Islamic law and tradition, a person must be buried as soon as possible after death, and the highest honour given to a deceased person is a swift burial. Anyone who has travelled on the highway between Ḥūth and al-Ḥarf knows that the mountains north of Ḥūth are infested by large flocks of vultures. Ḥasan's body was probably exposed intentionally, and his burial delayed (if not prevented), as a way of further demeaning *bayt* Ḥaydar and the tribe of Sufyān, even after Ḥasan's death. By leaving Ḥasan unburied, the killers left his body to fall prey to scavenger birds and stray beasts. The exposure of the boy's corpse was another way of abusing him and cannot be separated from the broader issue of the many sorts of disgrace intended to offend and dishonour *bayt* Ḥaydar.²⁶

26 Parallels can be drawn between this case and Sophocles' *Antigone* in ancient Greece. In *Antigone*, the drama sets in when Creon, the ruler of Thebes, decides that Polyneices will be refused a funeral and his body will left for carrion animals and vultures; this was considered the worst punishment at the time, see Rosivach 1983. The element of "abandonment

And why did the murderers not kill Ḥasan in front of everyone, if it was their right and custom, if it had been an ordinary issue of tribal revenge to settle a blood debt? Why did they kill the boy in the desolation of the mountains? From the vantage point of the Sufyān, this was not a “normal” revenge killing with the aim of restoring a balance. Rather, the killers had crossed the boundary of customary honour killing to insidious murder. Again, this murder increased the negative reciprocity of the “exchange of harms” and further escalated the matter.

The three men who had been identified as the culprits – by questioning eye-witnesses in Ḥūth and the testimony of the old man who happened to be present at the murder – immediately came into the crosshairs of Sufyān’s avengers, who shortly thereafter exacted revenge on the first of the three men.

The first culprit was killed by our tribesmen in the Khaywān area during the era of my father. [After the murder of my brother Ḥasan,] all segments of the tribe of Sufyān were instructed to place sentries on their borders and streets and keep an eye on people’s movements. One day we got initial news that the culprit frequented a particular place in the area of Khaywān, which enabled us to locate him and track him down. For this purpose, my father set up a surveillance team of Sufyānī tribesmen from a segment that dwells at the border with Ḥāshid near Khaywān in order to monitor and follow-up on the culprit’s movements. At the same time, in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a, he ordered a squadron of seven armed men from Dhū Aḥmad to prepare themselves to carry out the act of revenge. Upon the sentries’ signal, they snuck into Khaywān and shot the culprit. This is the way vengeance comes among the tribes.

Yet, before the Sufyān were able to exact vengeance on the other culprits in the case of Ḥasan – ‘Alī Sa’d* of al-‘Uṣaymāt and ‘Abdallāh Shirārī,* son and heir of Shaykh Muṣliḥ Shirārī* who was killed – the course of events took an unexpected turn when a few months later another son of Aḥmad Ḥaydar was killed.

in the wilderness” also bears an eerie resemblance to the murder of Yahyā Abū Shawārib, see p.123 n.15.

3 Ḥaydar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar (1982)

In the months after Ḥasan Ḥaydar's murder, the political wheels kept spinning. Despite, or because of, the cautious rapprochement between the YAR and PDRY, the NDF began to gravitate out of Aden's control. In the course of 1981, the conflict between Ṣāliḥ and the NDF further increased, and in spring 1982 the YAR, supported by Islamist militias of the Islamic Front rallied by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, launched an offensive on the NDF that involved intense fighting, as fierce or even fiercer than that during the 1979 border war against the PDRY. During this battle, the NDF managed to strike major blows against the government, such as the capture of Juban garrison in al-Ḍālī'. In summer 1982, however, the tide began to turn, when the YAR forces won a victory over the NDF that seemed to be decisive and final.²⁷

The NDF's defeat bolstered Ṣāliḥ's position. Without the NDF as a bone of contention, tensions between Sanaa and Aden further relaxed, as did the relationship between Sanaa and Riyadh. The completion and promotion of the Second Five-Year Plan in late April 1982 restored the YAR's credibility in the international community and held out the promise of considerable (and desperately needed) foreign aid.²⁸ In the summer of 1982, Ṣāliḥ's efforts towards the consolidation of peace and his rule were stalled on short notice, when both Sanaa and Aden turned their attention to the events unfolding in Lebanon and sent, separately, groups of volunteers to fight alongside the PLO against the Israeli forces.²⁹ In August 1982, the General People's Congress (GPC) was convened for the first time, as a means to stabilize the new-found peace, encourage national reconciliation, and broaden Ṣāliḥ's basis of support and legitimacy, particularly among the shaykhs who had called for the establishment of a "popular organization" (*tanẓīm sha'bi*) linking them to the political structures and financial resources of the state since the 1963 'Amrān conference.³⁰ Seven hundred GPC delegates from all over the country were elected by the National Dialogue Committee and three hundred were nominated by Ṣāliḥ, including some former leaders of the NDF to whom Ṣāliḥ had promised a general amnesty.³¹ In this way, some formerly NDF-related shaykhs from 'Amrān came

27 On the final battle between the YAR and the NDF, see Burrowes 1987: 104; Gause 1990: 146–147; and Halliday 1990: 130–131.

28 Burrowes 1987: 116, 122–123.

29 Burrowes 1987: 121–122. The 1982 Lebanon war began on 6 June 1982.

30 Al-Sharjābī 2009: 61.

31 On the early GPC, see Burrowes 1987: 76–77, 111–113, 124–125; Dresch 2000: 154–155; and Lackner 2023: 41–42.

under Sanaa's patronage: old adversaries of Ṣāliḥ and his regime became dubious friends.³²

Yet there were elements in the YAR, such as the Islamic Front directed by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and encouraged by the Saudis, for whom the idea of an amnesty, or anything less than a final, crushing defeat of the NDF, remained an anathema. The victory over the NDF had given the Islamist bloc another boost, and the moral and material backing of the Saudis continued, even after the end of the NDF rebellion. The Islamists further sought to destroy the YAR's political left, and if possible, purge the Arabian Peninsula of Marxism by overthrowing the regime in Aden.³³ Ṣāliḥ's position towards this upsurge of radical Islamist elements brought about by the NDF's defeat was, as was so often the case, ambiguous: he had needed the Islamists to defeat the NDF, and he still needed the backing of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. But he refused to give the Islamists any further influence over his state because their religious fanaticism ran counter to the goals of the 1962 revolution and Arab nationalism, which was the very (and only) pillar of legitimacy of the YAR, and hence of Ṣāliḥ.

Remnants of the NDF also remained. While they had been defeated on the battlefield, some NDF elements were not ready to give up their struggle. They were determined to continue undertaking acts designed to embarrass the security forces and the Islamists and to enhance the NDF's image of still having the upper hand in rural areas.³⁴ The strong NDF underground movement continued to stir up trouble, and the figurehead of the NDF in Sufyān was Ḥaydar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar.

Ḥaydar, then in his early twenties, had a charismatic personality. He was not only Aḥmad Ḥaydar's firstborn son and designated heir, but as the NDF field commander in Sufyān, he also played a leading role in the armed struggle against the regime. Together with the sons of other dissident Bakilī shaykhs he had studied at the Military College in Aden.

Ḥaydar was part of an active cadre of the NDF and the NDF leader in Sufyān. The southern leaders had invited him to study at the Military College in Aden. Via Aden, Ḥaydar travelled for further military studies to Beirut, and from there he graduated as an officer. During this stay, the Israeli invasion of Beirut and the Lebanon war [of summer 1982] took place, and Ḥaydar participated in the defence of Beirut under the

32 On the conflict between the government and NDF shaykhs, see Abū Laḥūm: vol. 3: 270–271. On the regime's reconciliation efforts with northern leftists, see Dresch 1989: 369.

33 Burrowes 1987: 121.

34 Burrowes 1987: 121.

leadership of the Palestinian leader Nāyif Ḥawātma.³⁵ Because of the war, Ḥaydar was delayed in Lebanon.

After his return to Sufyān, Ḥaydar resumed his leading role in the NDF. Together with his comrades, he put up political slogans of the NDF invoking the Red Revolution and Yemeni unity on Sufyān's bridges, rocks, and house walls in al-Ḥarf. The NDF cells began to distribute weapons and resume their guerrilla war. For this purpose, Ḥaydar organized his fellow combatants into groups, each about five people, to carry out nocturnal attacks on the security forces in 'Amrān. The regime was provoked, and before long renewed confrontations between the NDF and the security forces set in.

In autumn 1982, the ominousness of the situation was intensified by the fact that *bayt* Ḥaydar firmly believed that *bayt* al-Aḥmar had a secret hand in the murder of Ḥasan, and it was Ḥasan's brother Ḥaydar who spearheaded the earliest attempts at retaliation. In the conservative tribal milieu of highland Yemen, Ḥaydar's approaches to outwit the military superiority and quasi-hermetical protection of *bayt* al-Aḥmar was seen, to say the least, as provocative.

My brother Ḥaydar had an air of fearlessness about him. He used to provoke our enemies by sneaking into their houses dressed in women's clothing. After Ḥasan's death, Ḥaydar got into 'Abdallāh Shirārī's* house in this way and even into 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's mansion in al-Khamrī. On the occasion of some nuptial celebrations of al-Aḥmar's daughters and sons, Ḥaydar and his companions had the audacity to enter al-Aḥmar's mansion dressed as neighbourhood women, wearing face veils that did not even show their eyes. You know the *sharshaf* – full cover.³⁶ Under the *sharshaf*, they carried handguns with sound suppressors. They did not unveil [themselves] during the wedding on the grounds that it would be shameful and forbidden (*'ayb wa-ḥarām*) to show a woman's face to the black servants who serve the women (*ḥarīm*) and provide hospitality

35 Nāyif Ḥawātma was a Palestinian-Jordanian politician. From 1969, he was General Secretary of the Marxist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). In the 1960s, he spent some time in South Yemen, where he joined the southern Yemeni anticolonial struggle against British rule, see Bröning 2013: 179; and Jerrett 2020: 129. On Ḥawātma and his role in Palestinian politics, see also Hasso 2005: 11–12.

36 The two-piece *sharshaf* was first introduced in the nineteenth century by the Ottomans. It consists of a long pleated overskirt and a cape, combined with a face veil, as such, it covered the woman from head to toe, see Mundy 1983: 539–540; Adra 1988: 70; and Moors 2003: 46–49.

services at weddings, such as equipping the *madā'a* water pipes with tobacco.³⁷

And the voices?

There is no talk. At these weddings, there are crowds of hundreds of women in various kinds of veiling. It is impossible to inspect the *ḥarīm*. If discovered, Ḥaydar and those who were with him were ready to fight to the death and not surrender whilst dressed that way. Their intention was to enter the women's section donned in women's attire when the wedding was at its height and stay there lost in the crowds until 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar or one of his sons showed up to escort the bride to the bridegroom. All the women present, except for the closest relatives, then put on their veils. Ḥaydar and his comrades waited for 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's appearance in order to shoot him. In the ensuing chaos and mass panic, the women would scream and rush out the doors, and they would escape with them. But Ḥaydar's plan did not work out because neither 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar nor one of his sons showed up.

The ironic thing about Ḥaydar's enterprises was that at that time 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's Islamists heavily promoted the *sharshaf* among rural tribal women, who had been rather unused to the face veil.³⁸ These mortifying provocations launched against the figureheads of the regime in 'Amrān now brought Ḥaydar into the crosshairs of his enemies. They certainly believed that at this period of time, marked by the suppression of the NDF and the consolidation of the regime, the impunity of a man like Ḥaydar would furnish a dangerous example. Moved by their desire to demonstrate their domination, they were inclined to make an example of these rebels. But the situation was dangerous enough that they knew to be cautious. Knowing that it would have been unwise to enter into a direct confrontation with *bayt* Ḥaydar and the tribe of Sufyān, known for their vindictiveness and pugnacity, once again they sought to act by conspiring with proxies.

Our enemies sought to draw my father into blood revenge issues and wars with other tribes, in order to eliminate him and our family. But they faced difficulties in convincing other tribes to enter into conflict with

37 The *akhdām* (sg. *khadam*, lit. "servant") are an underprivileged group considered to be at the very bottom of the social system, see Meissner 1987: 165–170; and Walters 1987. The *madā'a* is a Yemeni water pipe for smoking tobacco leaves.

38 On Islamist activities altering dress codes in rural northern Yemen, see also Gingrich 2011: 44–48.

us, because our tribesmen are a fierce lot, and notorious for their ferocity and determination in vengeance and war. Our adversaries were well aware that they would pay dearly for what they did to us. Hence, true to the adage that “only the stone breaks the stone,”³⁹ our enemies applied their leverage in the very heart of our own tribe. This was the beginning.

The situation, as the conspirators perceived it, was hopeless as long as Ḥaydar was protected by his tribe. There was only one way to deal with Ḥaydar: to sow discord among the Sufyān tribe itself, to confront tribe with tribe, and force them to use their weapons against one another. Since the enemies of *bayt* Ḥaydar were unwilling to confront Ḥaydar by themselves, they searched for the weakest link and compelled one segment of the tribe to betray the other. And they guessed well enough who was the weakling among these segments: the Dhū ‘Aybān.*

The Dhū Qāsim (the home segment of *bayt* Ḥaydar) and the Dhū ‘Aybān* are two of seven segments (sg. *fakhd*) of the Dhū Aḥmad of Sufyān. The Dhū ‘Aybān* dwell in al-Buq’a village in the immediate vicinity of the Dhū Qāsim in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a; they were their neighbours, relatives, and confidants. Most of them – and this was the gist of the matter – served as bodyguards and escorts of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, the senior shaykh.⁴⁰ This innermost circle, this most sensitive area where the lines between escort, protection, and kinship were blurred, became the focus of the conspirators. They approached one of Ḥaydar’s closest friends and in-laws, Ḥamīd Hamadān of Dhū ‘Aybān*, who was also Ḥaydar’s comrade in the NDF and head of his personal bodyguard. Just as Ḥaydar had broken into the most intimate circle of the al-Aḥmar family, his enemies now subverted Ḥaydar’s private sphere and innermost security ring. Their artifice to bring down Ḥaydar was a psychological masterpiece.

Ḥamīd Hamadān hailed from the Dhū ‘Aybān* segment. The Dhū ‘Aybān* are originally from our own tribe, Dhū Aḥmad of Sufyān. He and my brother Ḥaydar had joined the NDF together and studied in Aden. Ḥamīd

39 *Mā tukasir al-ḥajar illā ukhtuhā*, lit. “nothing breaks the stone but her sister.” This Arabic proverb is often used in connection with the paramilitary “popular committees” (*lījān sha‘biyya*) that consist of tribesmen; they have been employed by Yemeni rulers to confront recalcitrant tribes throughout Yemeni history, see Brandt 2014b. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 121) observed that among the Nuer “inter-tribal fighting was considered fiercer and more perilous.”

40 The escorts and bodyguards of a shaykh are often composed of their relatives and in-laws, see Gingrich 2011: 42–44.

was Ḥaydar's close friend and comrade and captain of Ḥaydar's personal bodyguard. They were also bound together by intermarriage (*muṣāhira*), for Ḥamīd's wife was *ḥaydariyya*,⁴¹ and her sister was married to Ḥaydar. They had been like brothers, bound by blood as well as affection.

Because of his stay abroad [in Beirut], Ḥaydar was dependent on Ḥamīd, who remained in Sufyān in charge of the arms caches and the secret bases of the NDF whilst Ḥaydar was absent. During Ḥaydar's time in Beirut, those who were working to foment internal strife in Sufyān approached Ḥamīd and instigated him to sell an RPG-7 grenade launcher from the weapons that Ḥaydar had devoted to the work of the NDF. When Ḥaydar returned to Sufyān, he learnt of the sale of the weapon. In his anger, he hit Ḥamīd in the face with his hand. Ḥamīd was angry with Ḥaydar because of the slap and went to relatives in al-Ḥarf city where he remained for many days. Our enemies continued to incite Ḥamīd against Ḥaydar. They told him, "You were Ḥaydar's comrade and companion in all the battles and travel to Aden and you have the right to partnership in the arms shipments that Ḥaydar received from the south." After this, Ḥamīd refused to replace the grenade launcher that he had sold.

At that time, Ḥaydar was partner in a petrol station that operated with contraband on the public highway in the vicinity of Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a. One night, when this petrol station was shot at by unknown people, a fatal chain of events was set in motion.

The dispute between Ḥamīd and Ḥaydar continued to fester, for the instigators continued to incite Ḥamīd against Ḥaydar, whilst others were working on inciting Ḥaydar against Ḥamīd. The quarrel between them escalated, and one night the instigators fired a volley of gunshots at Ḥaydar's petrol station, because they knew that Ḥaydar would suspect Ḥamīd of having shot at it.

Indeed, when Ḥaydar saw the bullet holes, he headed, without any other escort than his driver, straight to the truck repair workshop in al-Ḥarf where Ḥamīd was working. He confronted Ḥamīd and asked him why he had shot at his petrol station. Ḥamīd responded by denying Ḥaydar's accusations, and in the course of the ensuing argument, they began to shout and level their guns against each other. Ḥamīd fired two shots at Ḥaydar and shattered his hand. Ḥaydar used his other hand to

41 *Ḥaydariyya*: from the Ḥaydar clan.

shoot at Ḥamīd, and three bullets grazed his neck and shoulder. Ḥamīd reeled yet staggered erect, and his last bullet hit Ḥaydar, fatally, in the chest. Ḥamīd was rescued by forces of the military police that just happened to be driving past on the nearby public highway, I daresay their presence was not accidental, and took Ḥamīd to a hospital in Sanaa.

The same night, Ḥaydar's corpse arrived at our home. I climbed on the truck bed and saw the body of my brother, may God have mercy on him, I saw the gunshots in his hand, and the other wound, the mortal one, in his chest. The news of Ḥaydar's murder stirred up our tribesmen like a hornet's nest. The night was one of feverish agitation. They swarmed out to al-Ḥarf in order to catch hold of Ḥamīd and broke into some houses in al-Ḥarf where they expected Ḥamīd to be hiding, but they did not find him. At last, they got word that the military police had evacuated him to Sanaa ... The tribe was aflame (*nār wa-shirār*). Ḥamīd was from the same segment, Dhū Aḥmad. Ḥamīd was from the Dhū 'Aybān* segment of Dhū Aḥmad. From our very segment, Dhū Aḥmad!

In the barracks of the Seventh Brigade at 'Amrān city, a feast was celebrated, out of satisfaction at Ḥaydar's death, almost at the same hour as the funeral of Ḥaydar was held in the graveyard of Jassār. In this case, however, although the occasion of the gathering was similar, the company was strikingly dissimilar. Instead of a feverishly agitated lot of tribesmen, the celebratory assembly in 'Amrān was composed of the very elite of 'Amrān's republican establishment – high-ranking commanders and officers of the armed forces and the military police, representatives of the state, and members of influential shaykhly families –, all those who loathed and despised *bayt* Ḥaydar, whose stubborn opposition greatly enhanced its fame among the northern tribes, and whose sacrifices elevated its dead sons to the rank of martyrs.

The day after the killing of Ḥaydar, al-Ḥumrān [al-Aḥmar tribal segment], the 'Afāfish [the supporters of President Ṣāliḥ], and the leaders of the armed forces and the military police celebrated a feast in the barracks of the Seventh Brigade at 'Amrān city. They slaughtered oxen and gave a repast for the officers of their military divisions, followed by *qāt* sessions and patriotic speeches in their camps.

There were soldiers from our tribe serving in 'Amrān's Seventh Brigade. They saw their commander gathering the officers, announcing the good news of the killing of Ḥaydar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar, and he offered a repast and *qāt* on this occasion, at his own expense, for the brigade's men. The same night, after they heard the commander's boastful talk and how he

rejoiced over Ḥaydar's death, the soldiers of our tribe deserted the brigade's barracks.

With this blow, 'Amrān's republican elite expected to have eliminated the NDF's last significant power base in Sufyān. They rejoiced not only over the downfall of Ḥaydar (who, in their eyes, was nothing but a revolutionary scoundrel), but also over the final defeat of the NDF in Sufyān, in which they foresaw for themselves the bright and cheerful prospect of consolidating their power in a pacified province. Their joyous feast betrayed the violent and vindictive passions that, at the same time, agitated the tribe of Sufyān – and, perchance, the obscure emotions of Ḥamīd secluded in a hospital in Sanaa, who had just been tricked into killing his comrade, protégé, brother-in-law, and best friend.

After his discharge from the hospital, Ḥamīd stayed in Sanaa, where he joined the ranks of the military police, which was under the command of Ḥāshid. In return for services rendered, he was made lieutenant (*mulāzim*) and received a monthly salary – for the Sufyān this was further evidence of the complicity of the security forces and the Ḥāshid in Ḥaydar's murder.

Again, in the midst of the new disaster that had befallen *bayt* Ḥaydar, Aḥmad Ḥaydar seemed to be the only one unmoved. Being convinced that censorious eyes were watching him for any reaction, again he stayed away from the funeral and refused to reveal any public display of grief and despair over the death of his firstborn son. After the funeral, the elders of Dhū Aḥmad convened in Aḥmad Ḥaydar's house to discuss the legal side of Ḥaydar's murder. Ḥasan had been a boy treacherously murdered for his father's ambitions, an innocent victim immolated for his family's political positions, and his murder, which featured five aspects of a black *'ayb*, resulted in an enormous blood debt, part of which was yet to be redeemed. Ḥaydar, in contrast, had been a grown man in the prime of his life, the senior shaykh's eldest son and heir, leader of the NDF in Sufyān, a daring and audacious character who had been killed in a kind of duel. According to tribal law, the conditions of these murders differed substantially.

We do not consider the killing of Ḥaydar a black *'ayb* because we cannot say with absolute certainty who fired at his petrol station under the cover of darkness. Later on we learned that Ḥamīd, in all likelihood, did not shoot at Ḥaydar's petrol station, and that those who shot at it were the same people who were working to stir up internal strife in Sufyān. And Ḥaydar, suspecting Ḥamīd at having shot [at the gas station], had levelled his gun against Ḥamīd. Hence, Ḥamīd was guilty of only one *'ayb*: the *'ayb* of killing Ḥaydar in a violent argument.

For the enemies of *bayt* Ḥaydar, the conspiracy had been a full success. Ḥaydar had been killed and Ḥamīd's desertion to the military police was a heavy blow to the remnants of the NDF in Sufyān.

Ḥamīd knew all the internal affairs of the NDF – its members, supporters, sympathizers, secret bases, weapons stores, plans – and became central to the army's efforts to dismantle the NDF networks. The state heralded its victory with a series of bold actions; several NDF ringleaders were arrested, including sons of other dissident shaykhs, and bases and weapons stores were raided. The tensions between the Sufyān and the regime mounted as Aḥmad Ḥaydar publicly accused the Ḥāshid leaders and 'Amrān's security forces of being behind the murder of his firstborn son.

The security forces were too well acquainted with the Sufyān's vindictiveness to assume that *bayt* Ḥaydar would pardon the killer, or accept material compensation. To deprive *bayt* Ḥaydar of the possibility of taking vengeance, Ḥamīd's name was put on a list of officers to be sent to Qatar for military training. Their efforts, however, proved futile. One month after Ḥaydar's death, in the eleventh hour before Ḥamīd's flight to Qatar, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his men tracked him down and exacted revenge.

We assumed that Ḥamīd would bid farewell to his family before leaving for Qatar, hence we placed sentries at the highway and put his home village, al-Buq'a, under close surveillance. And of course in this issue women's intelligence also played a part. Because we were one segment and closely related to each other, and they had women in our houses, and we had women in their houses, there were issues of love and passion at work.

Indeed, the night before his departure to Qatar, intelligence reached us that Ḥamīd came secretly from Sanaa to al-Buq'a to say goodbye to his family. In the darkness of night, and without Ḥamīd and his relatives becoming aware of it, our gunmen spread out to establish a perimeter around their village. A squad of snipers slipped into the house next door, which happened to belong to the Ra'dān family, our relatives and closest friends. Under the cover of night, the snipers posted themselves at the windows and on the roof, from where they monitored Ḥamīd's house. At dawn, shortly before his departure to Sanaa, Ḥamīd appeared on the roof, where he was immediately struck and killed by a hail of bullets that literally tore him to pieces. Ḥamīd's men and relatives responded and shot back fiercely, and a gun battle raged from house to house. A war embraced the whole village and its surroundings; it lasted throughout the day and the following night, and in it Ḥamīd's mother, too, was killed. The

battle only ceased after the arrival of a local mediation committee that requested a cease-fire of fifteen days to stop the war.

What happened to Ḥamīd's mother?

There were conflicting opinions. Some say that she was hit by a stray round of our bullets when she threw herself on the body of her dead son. Various rumours were floated about, and my father commissioned a committee in order to investigate her death. The committee inspected her wounds and the place where she had died, and decided that she had been hit in the staircase of her house. In the staircase, however, there were no windows. They found that, after her son was shot, she left the house to call a doctor from Ṣa'da city. But when the doctor arrived at the village, the street battle was still raging and the whole village was hidden with gun smoke. Thus the doctor decided to return to Ṣa'da. When Ḥamīd's mother returned to her house, she found the door locked from the inside. Her husband had barricaded it, fearing that our gunmen would storm the house. Ḥamīd's mother entered the house by a small side entrance through the sheepfolds. When her husband and those who were with him heard steps ascending the stairs, they thought that our men had broken into the house, and fired randomly into the dark staircase, where she was hit by a bullet and died. This was the opinion of the committee, which was confirmed by a tribal judgement signed by forty-four people who took oaths that our men were innocent of killing her.

In the eyes of *bayt* Ḥaydar, justice had been done, at least in Ḥaydar's case. Ḥamīd's death had paid for Ḥaydar's death, and parity had been restored by killing "one for one." To show that Ḥaydar had been avenged, the avengers gathered at the graveyard of Jassār and fired shots over Ḥaydar's grave, after which two stones were placed on it. No shots, however, were fired over Ḥasan's grave, for only one of the three culprits in Ḥasan's case had been brought to justice. For the time being, the other two had managed to elude confrontation with Sufyān's avengers by relocating to Sanaa, where they lived under the protection of the security forces that were dominated by the Ḥāshid.

4 Ḥāmis Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar (1983)

From the vantage point of *bayt* Ḥaydar, justice had been done and balance had been achieved by killing Ḥamīd for Ḥaydar. But the Dhū 'Aybān* refused to acknowledge that parity had been restored. In their opinion, *bayt* Ḥaydar owed them reparation for the murder of Ḥamīd and the damage inflicted on their

village. Again, the Dhū ‘Aybān’s* feeling of having been wronged and unjustly treated by *bayt* Ḥaydar was nourished by the latter’s enemies, whose aim was to stir up further contention and involve the tribe of Sufyān even more deeply in turmoil and internal war. At this point the affair took on a particularly vitriolic turn, corroding the tribe from within like acid.

For *bayt* Ḥaydar, the further proliferation of the conflict with the Dhū ‘Aybān* was a catastrophic development. Al-Buq’a, the home village of the Dhū ‘Aybān,* was within sight (and shooting range) of Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a. *Bayt* Ḥaydar and its tribal segment, the Dhū Qāsim, were closely connected with the Dhū ‘Aybān* through territorial proximity, kinship relations, intermarriage, and protection. As a result, those who should have proved the most loyal among their tribesmen became the least dependable.

After the killing of Ḥaydar and Ḥamīd, my father and the Dhū ‘Aybān* had a dispute. My father had granted the Dhū ‘Aybān* the land [near our village] on which they built their houses in order to be close to us and our village, because most men of the Dhū ‘Aybān* were in the service of my father as his bodyguards and escorts. After the death of Ḥaydar and Ḥamīd, my father sensed that there were suspicious movements and activities among the Dhū ‘Aybān.* Hence, he asked them to sign a written pledge (*warqat ta’ahud*) that, if they used their houses to conspire against us and our village, they would have to leave. In return, my father would compensate them for their withdrawal. But the Dhū ‘Aybān* refused. Our enemies knew about the dispute between us and the Dhū ‘Aybān.* They secretly sent their agents to the Dhū ‘Aybān,* colluded with them and gave them money and weapons in return for the Dhū ‘Aybān* refusing my father’s requests to reconcile and rebuild trust.

How did he know about these “suspicious movements”?

By way of gossip. Our enemies knew about the dispute and of course they knew about the grievances and tensions between us and the Dhū ‘Aybān* since the death of my brother Ḥaydar and Ḥamīd Hamadān, because they themselves had fabricated them [these tensions], and they exploited them to further widen the wedge between us and the Dhū ‘Aybān.* They entered into the conflict between us and the Dhū ‘Aybān* in this way and thus succeeded in breaking Sufyān’s front. We heard about secret meetings between the Dhū ‘Aybān* and the agents of our enemies, who seduced them from their allegiance to us with promises and bribes and conspired with them to kill my father.

In the winter of 1983, the Dhū ‘Aybān* set an ambush for my father at the northern edge of al-‘Amashiyya, at the border between Sufyān and

the tribe of Āl ‘Ammār. In this area, when you come out of al-‘Amashiyya and ascend towards the plateau of Āl ‘Ammār, the road makes some sharp turns that render it a good place for an ambush. One day, when my father was returning from Şa‘da, they ambushed him and his guards and opened fire on them without warning. They were in an advantageous position because they had set up the ambush and had well-fortified positions, whereas my father and his men were unprotected and caught by surprise when passing through on the open road. My father was wounded and my brother Ḥāmis killed, may God rest his soul. My father had ten guards with him, one of whom was also wounded; his name was Şālih Dirham Ra’dān. Nothing happened to the other side, because they had entrenched themselves behind barricades made of piles of stones. The exchange of fire lasted for more than two hours, and only ceased because my father’s men feared that he would bleed to death if they further delayed his emergency treatment. They protected him by applying suppressive fire until they had evacuated him from the battlefield and brought him to the hospital in Şa‘da city.

The remains of my brother Ḥāmis, may God rest his soul, were interred in the graveyard of Jassār, beside his brothers Ḥaydar and Ḥasan. My father was taken to al-Salām Hospital in Şa‘da city. Upon the news that their shaykh was wounded, the tribesmen of Sufyān flocked to the hospital and surrounded it with gunmen. I myself was among them. We took control of its gates and entrances, and of the accesses to the intensive care unit, the surgical and anaesthesia departments, and controlled the flow of patients and visitors. Upon our de facto takeover of al-Salām Hospital, tensions with the government’s security forces in Şa‘da city flared up. The situation was only relieved when President Şālih called my father from Sanaa on the telephone and cordially wished him a speedy convalescence. Şālih ordered state officials in Şa‘da to visit my father on a daily basis and follow up on his health. He also instructed the security forces to tolerate Sufyān’s armed tribesmen controlling the entrances of the hospital and the section where my father slept.

My father’s wound was very serious, because the bullet that had hit him had first penetrated the metal door of the car and then exploded in my father’s body in a hail of metal splinters that ripped apart parts of the large and small intestines. Because of the large wound, my father remained in the hospital for two months. Shaykhs of sympathetic tribes came to visit my father on a daily basis: From Khawlān Quḍā’a, Saḥār, Murād, Dahm, Wā’ilah (...)

No where was the atmosphere of danger and anxiety as palpable as it was in the hospital in Ṣa'da. Nothing shows more plainly than the hospital episode how much the Sufyān had already been mentally exhausted by the perilous situation and constant threat, the permanent alert that fate could (and did) strike at any moment, bringing death and doom. After securing the entrances of the hospital and turning it into a fortress, being determined to defend their shaykh against any intrusion, they focused on the internal procedures at the hospital: Was the hospital director, a Saudi national, trustworthy? Were there spies and henchmen of their enemies among the doctors and the staff? Was there deadly poison in Aḥmad Ḥaydar's medications and infusions? Their mistrust intensified until at last the hospital director threatened to forcefully discharge Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his men from the hospital and leave him to die. In turn sympathetic fellow shaykhs from Ṣa'da – Qā'id Shuwayṭ, Ḥusayn al-Surabī, Ibn Kubās, and others – felt obliged to intervene and threatened to close the hospital if Aḥmad Ḥaydar was discharged against his will.

Indeed it is usually unseen perils that inspire the greatest terror, and maybe the Sufyān's alarms made them see ghosts. Oddly enough, this episode of peril-induced fear and hysteria after the death of Ḥāmis and the traumatic injury of Shaykh Aḥmad coincided with one of the rare sightings of Sufyān's legendary lion, the namesake of *bayt* Ḥaydar:

When they learned of the wounding of my father and the death of my brother, my uncle and cousins in Sufyān, may God have mercy on them, left for Ṣa'da in the first light of dawn. They swore that on their way, all at once, they spotted the lion (*asad al-ʿAmashiyya*) strolling along the roadside of the public highway and crossing the road in front of them. He loitered at the road, and, after a while, disappeared in the expanse of al-ʿAmashiyya.

While for some of the Sufyān the apparition of the lion of al-ʿAmashiyya at this point in time was certainly a kind of portent, Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his advisors focused their attention on practical issues. Aḥmad Ḥaydar's third son was dead, murdered by those who were once closest to them, and Aḥmad Ḥaydar himself had suffered a major injury in an attempted assassination from among the ranks of his former bodyguards. From the perspective of customary law, the assessment of the case was as follows.

There are multiple features of a black *ʿayb* in the killing of my brother Ḥāmis. The first black *ʿayb* is killing him on a public road. The second black *ʿayb* is that he was innocent and had been killed for no reason, since

he had no part in the conflict. And the third black *‘ayb* is [that he was murdered] at the request of our political enemies [and] for venal ambitions. There is also a black *‘ayb* in the wounding of my father, the senior shaykh, the shaykh of all of us. All this we consider features of black *‘ayb* and gross acts of treason.

On his sickbed, after regaining full consciousness, Aḥmad Ḥaydar orchestrated the measures of retaliation. The name of the man who had shot Ḥāmīd (in fact aiming at Aḥmad Ḥaydar) in revenge for Ḥāmīd was Muḥsin Muṭṭlaq ‘Aybān,* one of Ḥāmīd’s relatives. Furthermore, a member of the Ra’dān family, who was among the bodyguards of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, had been wounded in the ambush. The Ra’dān family, although of ‘Aybān* progeny and resident in al-Buq’a, was fiercely loyal to Aḥmad Ḥaydar. By chance the Ra’dān house in al-Buq’a was right next door to the house of Muḥsin Muṭṭlaq ‘Aybān.*

My father summoned a group of men of our tribe, who were known for their ferocity, experience, and skill at arms. He told them, “Arrange for the guarding of the Ra’dān house, the only [of our] house[s] in the village of Dhū ‘Aybān* al-Buq’a.” This was the house from which Ḥāmīd Hamadān had been shot. My father told them, “The Ra’dān house is important in our war with the Dhū ‘Aybān*; we must keep it by all means. The Dhū ‘Aybān* must not occupy it by force, nor demolish it, because this house is our only foothold in their village.” He instructed the men to guard the Ra’dān house permanently, and to change the guards every month.

The men spent a few hours by the bedside of the wounded shaykh and returned to Sufyān the same day, determined to implement Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s instructions, to keep an eye on Muḥsin Muṭṭlaq ‘Aybān,* and to protect the Ra’dān house in al-Buq’a from a hostile takeover by treasonous neighbours.

Two months later, when my father was discharged from the hospital, a large number of our tribesmen went to escort him to our house in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a. In al-Buq’a, Muḥsin Muṭṭlaq ‘Aybān,* the killer of my brother Ḥāmīd, believed that all the guards had left the Ra’dān house in order to join my father’s escort. The next day, he started to shoot at the Ra’dān house from a loophole in his house. One of our snipers placed in the Ra’dān house aimed with his gun at the loophole from which the shot came and hit Muḥsin Muṭṭlaq ‘Aybān* in the head. He died on the spot.

The killing of Muḥsin Muṭlaq ‘Aybān* brought about the general destabilization of the Sufyān according to the desire of the enemies of *bayt* Ḥaydar. Behind the massive walls of their houses, each party geared up for war. The Dhū ‘Aybān* rallied their men, about 100 men in arms, to confront Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a and carry on the feud on a broader basis. *Bayt* Ḥaydar responded with a general call to war (*naḡīr*) for the whole of the Sufyān to support them in their struggle against the Dhū ‘Aybān*.

Generally, if a “natural” killing happens between two segments, the other segments [of Sufyān] work to contain the problem between these two segments. But our problem with the Dhū ‘Aybān* was different, for all other segments stood with us against the segment of Dhū ‘Aybān* because they were the aggressors and implemented the directions of our political enemies, in exchange for financial and material support. All the tribes of Sufyān were mobilized in our conflict with the Dhū ‘Aybān*.¹ This was done at the request of my father, on the basis that if there was a killing [in this war], it would not be blamed on him and his sons alone. It would be blamed on the whole tribe of Sufyān, on the war between the Dhū ‘Aybān* and the tribe of Sufyān, so the Dhū ‘Aybān* would be unable to pursue further acts of revenge [against *bayt* Ḥaydar].

It was a war that the Dhū ‘Aybān* waged from their village on our village. Tribal wars are different from state wars. There are no territorial conquests in tribal wars. A tribal war is static, similar to a war of attrition (*ḥarb al-istinzāf*), for each tribe shoots towards the village of the other tribe and vice versa. In general, during these confrontations, other tribes rush to offer mediation to stop the war.... But the Dhū ‘Aybān*,² who were encouraged, paid and equipped by our enemies, were determined to continue the war and rejected all mediations for peace.

The war reinforced the alliance between the Dhū ‘Aybān* and the enemies of *bayt* Ḥaydar. As a result, the situation in Sufyān further deteriorated, and public life in the area of Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a and al-Buq’a was paralyzed by random shelling of both villages with small and medium weapons. Farming and agriculture, practiced rather sporadically anyway, were largely abandoned. Because of the constant danger caused by stray bullets, Aḥmad Ḥaydar decided to relocate his two youngest sons, Mujāhid and Fayṣal, from Sufyān to al-Jawf, where they stayed in the house of a friend and shaykh (who later became Mujāhid’s first father-in-law) and were enrolled in school in Sarāḥāt al-Matūn. Al-Jawf, where the state maintained little presence and influence in the 1980s, was considered safer than Sufyān.

5 Aḥmad Qā'id Ibn Ḥaydar (1987)

The hostilities related to the feud between the Dhū 'Aybān* and *bayt* Ḥaydar and the instability and strife resulting from it lasted for three years and reinforced the Sufyān's reputation of being home to a particularly unruly and savage tribe, the dangerous backyard of 'Amrān province, and a major stumbling block for the progress of pacification and state building in highland Yemen. They fostered the prevalent preconceptions of the grim and troublesome character of the Sufyān whom 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar once denounced as "envious people, with black hearts" (*nās ḥāqidīn, qulūb-hum sawdā*).⁴²

On the other hand, the longer the Sufyān's affairs remained in disorder, the better for the regime's cause. Generally after the defeat of the NDF in the central areas and some northern tribal strongholds, the situation developed favourably for Ṣāliḥ. In 1986, after bloody infighting in the YSP in Aden, YSP Chairman 'Alī Nāṣir Muḥammad and tens of thousands of his supporters fled to the YAR. Their flight led to further friction among the remnants of the NDF, with some supporting 'Alī Nāṣir and some opposing him.⁴³ The wars and guerrilla campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s gave Ṣāliḥ good reason to build a large military, which he then imposed on unruly areas. In 'Amrān, army units – for the most part consisting of Ḥāshid tribesmen in uniform – were deployed to key cities and districts; important towns like Ḥuṭh and Khamir, as well as parts of al-'Uṣaymāt, were garrisoned thus.⁴⁴ Ṣāliḥ continued to expand his influence among the shaykhs, and in this way many of his former enemies came into the fold of the regime, for the most part on the platform of the GPC, and they began to spend a good deal of time in Sanaa, near the president and his resources, for everyone knew the rule of this society was (as in most autocratic, quasi-courtly systems clustered around a ruler) that whoever is absent loses his share.

Ṣāliḥ also kept an eye on Aḥmad Ḥaydar, particularly because of his prominent position as senior shaykh of the Sufyān, figurehead of the Bakilī opposition, and his paramount importance as lord over the crossing of al-Mudarrij. For his part, Aḥmad Ḥaydar still bore in mind that in 1983, during his hospital stay in Ṣa'da, Ṣāliḥ had remotely aided him by calling back the state security forces. He was ready to meet the president and claim the rights to which his name and tribal position entitled him. Dealing with Aḥmad Ḥaydar, however, meant

⁴² As quoted in Dresch and Haykel 1995: 416.

⁴³ On the events in Aden and 'Alī Nāṣir's flight to the YAR, see Gause 1990: 151–152; Halliday 1990: 41–44, 133–136; and Brehony 2011: 151–153.

⁴⁴ Dresch 2000: 160.

working through a long catalogue of woes and grievances, not least because of the death of his three sons and the war with the Dhū ‘Aybān,* in which Aḥmad Ḥaydar suspected that the security forces had a part. Nevertheless, between 1983 and 1987 several meetings took place between the shaykh and the president with the aim of establishing dialogue and enquiring into forms and conditions of future cooperation.

[In these meetings,] my father demanded from Ṣāliḥ the formation of a governmental committee to conduct a field survey in Sufyān and other governorates dominated by Bakīl, in order to determine their need for infrastructure projects such as drinking water supply, hospitals, and schools. In addition, vocational training and the fair participation of the Bakīl in awards of national and international university scholarships. He also called for the inclusion of tribal officers of Bakīl in the security apparatus, including those who had graduated from military colleges in the PDRY. These were the same demands that I also made later in my meetings with Ṣāliḥ in 1988, 1995, 2004, and 2006, all in vain. What Ṣāliḥ was ready to offer was the disbursement of high personal salaries for us from the state’s treasury. He always refused to accept the communitarian demands.

As a boy of ten, Mujāhid attended one of his father’s meetings with the president.

In 1984, I accompanied my father to one of his meetings with Ṣāliḥ. I listened to their discussions and their disagreements. All at once Ṣāliḥ turned to me and asked with well-feigned gentleness, “And what are your demands, o Bedouin (*yā badwī*)?”; [the term] “Bedouin” was aimed at me. After the hassles with my father, now he wished to play the magnanimous with me. I answered, “I want a school in our village. And a car that carries me to school in al-Jawf until the school in our village is built.” Ṣāliḥ retorted, “And for what purpose do you want education, o Bedouin? I rather expected you to demand a gun.” I answered, “I want an education in order to sit on this chair,” pointing with my finger at the chair on which he was sitting. Ṣāliḥ burst into a fit of laughter, and so did ‘Abdallāh al-Bashīrī, who was at that time chief of staff of the armed forces.⁴⁵

45 Al-Bashīrī was one of Ṣāliḥ’s closest confidants and later became head of the presidential secretariat. According to Phillips, he was one of the gatekeepers in Ṣāliḥ’s system in which everything was micromanaged by the president, see Phillips 2011a: 93.

Al-Bashīrī rose from his chair and placed a kiss on my forehead. Šālīḥ exclaimed jestingly: “O the rapacity of the tribesman (*yā tawḥ al-qabīlī*)!” What is important is that the school he ordered for me has never been built. But he gave me the means to procure the car. We bought the car, which thenceforward took me to school in al-Jawf.

The price for Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s cooperation was dear. Very dear. He knew his importance, and the death of his sons had only served to increase his obstinacy. The principal political goal of the NDF was participation in the cabinet to influence the YAR’s policies. Aḥmad Ḥaydar went even further, as his demands amounted to parity between the Ḥāshid and the Bakīl. Šālīḥ, for his part, was nonplussed by these bold demands; he felt that agreeing to such provisos would amount to countenancing a revolt against him. They were impossible to implement without turning the YAR’s status quo upside down, as it rested, since the Nasirite coup attempt, the border war in 1979, and the War of the Central Areas, on close cooperation with the Ḥāshid and their militant Islamist column. Aḥmad Ḥaydar called for the empowerment of the Bakīl, and his son’s puerile (or menacing?) remark that he wanted to sit on the president’s chair, certainly did nothing to dissipate Šālīḥ’s concerns.

However, Aḥmad Ḥaydar was too important to ignore. Šālīḥ grew frustrated with him, yet in 1987 was forced to resume negotiations when the relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia went through a period of semi-rupture and a military confrontation between them loomed. At the YAR’s southern border, too, tensions flared up over several issues, the most critical concerning the close proximity of oil exploration by foreign companies in the *shaṭrayn*’s un-demarcated borderlands.⁴⁶ All this engrossed the attention of the government and the armed forces, and Šālīḥ was concerned that in the renewed tussles of power between the YAR and her neighbours, Aḥmad Ḥaydar would exploit the situation by blocking the arterial road at al-Mudarrij, rallying the Bakīl and entering the field against him, because in his experience the Sufyān under Aḥmad Ḥaydar seized upon any and every occasion to rise up in arms. An envoy was dispatched to Sufyān conveying an invitation to the capital, and under great precautionary measures – a sign of mutual distrust – Aḥmad Ḥaydar arrived in Sanaa.

46 Dunbar 1992: 459 n. 8; and Brehony 2011: 174. Hydrocarbon resources were only found on non-Ḥāshid lands.

In 1987, Ṣālīḥ sent a military helicopter to our village in Sufyān to transfer my father to the capital, overflying the Ḥāshid lands and checkpoints which he otherwise would have had to cross. On board the helicopter was his friend Brigadier ‘Abdallāh Nājī Dāris, who served as the government’s guarantor (*dāmin*) for my father in order to protect him against any treachery (*min ayy ghadr*).⁴⁷

There were no witnesses to the interview between the President Ṣālīḥ and Aḥmad Ḥaydar, and we know nothing of it but its result. All we can guess is that it did not reconcile them, but rather marked a further milestone of mutual disillusionment. In retrospect we must guess that they reached a point at which an understanding was impossible, and any prospects for a constructive relationship between them were gone – positively gone. When it began to dawn on Ṣālīḥ that the antagonism and disruption between them were beyond repair, and that all attempts to woo Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s favour were in vain, his attitude changed and he withdrew his protecting hand, which he – not out of friendship or affection, but out of pure political calculation – had held over him. Henceforth Aḥmad Ḥaydar carried on his shoulders the enmity of both *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the president. He was still in Sanaa when the hour of his own doom struck.

They could not kill my father as long as he was entrenched amidst the tribe (*mutaḥuṣn wasaṭ al-qabīla*). Hence, after the talks, Ṣālīḥ asked my father to stay in Sanaa until he could look into his demands, while ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar organized a police car and a team of assassins dressed in police attire. These feigned policemen patrolled in al-Rawḍa neighbourhood, where my father was staying. A few days after the interview, in the early morning, they shot my father when he left the house.

The killers of my father were men of the Dhū ‘Aybān.* They had fled Sufyān, and in return for services rendered, al-Aḥmar had included them in his own bodyguard. The Dhū ‘Aybān* came from al-Aḥmar’s city mansion in al-Ḥaṣaba in Sanaa. The police car, however, belonged to the government’s fleet.

Where were the bodyguards of your father?

The bodyguards were asleep. Because of the wound he suffered in 1983, the doctors had advised him to stay away from chewing *qāt*. That’s why

47 ‘Abdallāh Dāris of Dhū Muḥammad was governor of Ma’rib, see Dresch 1995: 43. On guarantor shaykhs and tribal guarantees, see Serjeant 1977: 229; al-‘Alīmī 1988: 102–103; and Dresch 1989: 90–93.

he went to bed early and rose from sleep at dawn, unlike his bodyguards, who chewed *qāt* during their night watch and slept after dawn. They did not know that my father left the house early in the morning with one of his counsellors, to warm himself in the morning sun. My father did not tell them to get up.

Did his counsellor recognize the men of the Dhū ‘Aybān?*

Yes, this was part of the plot. Šālīḥ and al-Aḥmar did not want an anonymous assassination that would then be blamed on them. [For them] it was necessary for the identity of the assassins to be known.

Al-Aḥmar and Šālīḥ thought that by killing my father they would be able to achieve whatever they wanted, for my elder brothers were dead and we, the rest of his sons, were mere children, and [they thought that] we cannot resist [them]... They little knew whom they had to deal with, and would be surprised to experience the opposite.

6 Equation Change

This marks the end of Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s era, and the beginning of the era of his son Mujaḥid. The following chapter, “Burdensome Inheritances,” enquires into Mujaḥid’s agency as shaykh. The remaining section of the present chapter ties up the loose ends of the feud and considers Mujaḥid’s agency as avenger, for together with the role of shaykh, the role of the *walī l-dam* fell to him, the “blood custodian” and avenger of his father and his brothers Ḥasan and Ḥāmis. At that point in time, only the death of Ḥaydar was considered avenged.

Mujaḥid’s succession also entailed a shift in style. Whereas his father’s acts of revenge had always been strictly in line with tribal law and custom and its inherent principles of proportionality, revenge now assumed a reckless and hazardous character, reflecting the character of Mujaḥid himself. Mujaḥid’s childhood and youth had been characterized by experiences of violence: his confinement as a juvenile government hostage in the Qishla in al-Ḥarf, the years of peril and the violent deaths of his brothers and his father, the war with the Dhū ‘Aybān* – the whole catastrophe that had assailed his family. None could have foreseen that it would be such a complete disaster. Since these experiences, Mujaḥid cherished a wild vindictiveness against *bayt* al-Aḥmar. He piled upon ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar the sum of all the rage and loathing felt by his family and tribe against the Ḥāshid “usurpers.” ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar stood before his eyes as the incarnation of all those calamities that had befallen him, his family, and his tribe; all that was visibly personified, and made practically assailable, in Ḥāshid’s senior shaykh.

His father's death set off a brief but intense outburst of almost indiscriminate violence against all those whom Mujāhid considered to have had a part in his father's assassination.⁴⁸ After this, a fundamental change occurred in Mujāhid's vengeance strategy. His focus and retributive thrust narrowed to the targeted pursuit of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, whom Mujāhid considered the soul of this whole disastrous affair. In this asymmetric engagement, the "tribal" vengeance strategy of his father had not worked out, rather the situation had assumed the character of a struggle against the Lernaean Hydra, the many-headed serpent of Greek mythology. Whenever the Hydra loses a head, two new ones grow in its place; the Hydra is considered a parable for situations in which any attempt to contain or suppress it only leads to further escalation. The Hydra can only be appeased by leaving it untouched. Now, instead of futilely attempting to cut off the Hydra's ever regrowing heads, as his father had, Mujāhid henceforth directed his efforts on destroying the serpent's centre.

In the end, we tied our revenge to its initiator: 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. Because whenever we killed one of the assassins, al-Aḥmar continued to incite people against us, because he did not care if we killed the murderers as long as he and his sons were safe. In the beginning we truly wore ourselves out, for whenever we killed someone in revenge, al-Aḥmar increased the payment of money against us. After the death of my father, I changed the equation (*mu'ādila*), and directed the revenge directly on 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons. The new equation was based on pairing *ḥaydarī* with *aḥmarī* blood, and the principle that every drop of *ḥaydarī* blood would lead to a drop of *aḥmarī* blood. This is why we consider my blood and my revenge to be with *bayt* al-Aḥmar, because they are our tribal peers, and they are the ones who conspired against us.

And after our attempt to kill his firstborn son Ṣādiq [in 1991], 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar knew that the equation had positively changed.⁴⁹ From then on, he did not pay one more riyal against me because the new equation aimed from our heads to the heads of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons, that is Ṣādiq, Ḥamīd, and Ḥusayn, for his other sons do not have leadership qualities. ... This is why we have not accepted any blood money so far, for two reasons: first, because our custom in Sufyān is that we either kill or forgive. And second, because we want to keep this case open, and take due revenge.

48 On these raids, see the following chapter.

49 See Chapter 4.

One of Mujāhid's first acts of revenge, which had a markedly brutal character, was the expulsion of the Dhū 'Aybān.* The Dhū 'Aybān* were considered traitors who had been seduced from their allegiance to *bayt* Ḥaydar and allied themselves with the enemy. In the moral system of the tribes, tribal belonging is most often expressed in kin terms, and in those terms one does not stand with outsiders against one's kin. This revenge did not aim at holding accountable certain members of the Dhū 'Aybān* who had been directly involved in the preceding revenge process, but at removing the Dhū 'Aybān* segment, root and branch, from Sufyān.

After my father was killed, the tribe of Sufyān stood with me, because the Dhū 'Aybān* and with them a group of Hāshid [tribesmen] had moved to kill my father from inside al-Aḥmar's mansion in al-Ḥaṣaba in Sanaa. The whole tribe of Sufyān rose in order to shell the houses of the Dhū 'Aybān* and to destroy their homes. We used artillery shelling to expel the Dhū 'Aybān* from their village, and after they had fled, we destroyed their houses from within by detonating landmines. This uprooting (*iqtilā'*) is governed by customary law, as punishment for those who have committed treason, who conspire against their own shaykh, traitors who accept the support of the enemy in order to wage war on their own tribe.⁵⁰

After their "uprooting" and the demolition of their houses, the Dhū 'Aybān* proved unable to settle elsewhere in the territory of the Bakīl. In the event of a severe disagreement between a shaykh and members of his tribe, the latter have the option to seek asylum with another tribe, a process governed by the legal provisions of *ḥaqq al-rabā'* that allow a tribe to grant refuge or asylum to external people.⁵¹ The rules of *ḥaqq al-rabā'*, however, did not apply in the case of Dhū 'Aybān.*

50 In the history of Yemen there are many cases documented in which displacement along the destruction of houses served as punishment for "treason." A shaykh from Khawlān al-Tiyāl told me that in imamic times, the houses of insurgent shaykhs were systematically destroyed by the Imam's forces (this happened to his family during the tribal insurrections preceding the 1962 revolution). In the YAR period, the republican governments continued the practice of destroying the houses of dissident shaykhs, see Abū Laḥūm: vol. 3: 270–271 for the Abū Nuṣṭān case in Arḥab. On the destruction of houses or their roofs and the expulsion of people and their families as punishment in tribal law, see also Abū Ghānim 1985: 285–286.

51 Besides tribal refugees, *ḥaqq al-rabā'* also applies to those persecuted for political reasons or those fleeing arrest by security organs, aid agencies operating on a tribe's territory, and others, see Brandt 2017b: 112–113. *Ḥaqq al-rabā'* assigns asylum seekers temporary membership in a tribal community; this includes protection and a promise not to deliver

There are certain conditions for the application of *ḥaqq al-rabāʿ*. The most prominent of these conditions is that *al-rabāʿ* does not apply to those who brought disgrace on themselves. Because *al-rabāʿ* is a window for those who were wronged or mistreated and who are seeking justice. And the case of the Dhū ʿAybān* was completely different. [After the uprooting of the Dhū ʿAybān,*] al-Aḥmar tried to communicate with some tribes of Bakīl to make them accept the Dhū ʿAybān* by way of *al-rabāʿ*, with the aim of rendering the conflict an internal conflict among the Bakīl. But the tribes of Bakīl refused and told al-Aḥmar that the Dhū ʿAybān* were disgraced (*muʿayyab*) and that they deserved neither shelter nor encouragement, and that those who foolishly disgraced themselves do not deserve the advocacy and protection connected with *al-rabāʿ*. And when the Dhū ʿAybān* found themselves homeless on the street, they went to al-Aḥmar and made perfectly plain to him that he had seduced them and encouraged them and paid them to do what they did. After al-Aḥmar sensed that they would openly hold him responsible for their predicament, he provided shelter for them in [his home village] al-Khamrī.

In 1988, ʿAlī Saʿd* of al-ʿUṣaymāt (the second of the three killers of the 1981 case of Ḥasan) was brought to justice. ʿAlī Saʿd* had left ʿAmrān in 1981 to elude a confrontation with Sufyān's avengers and sought refuge in the capital, where he lived under the protection of the security forces. In 1988, after the death of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, ʿAlī Saʿd* imprudently left the capital and returned to ʿAmrān.

ʿAlī Saʿd* had been given the position of district director of Khārīf and had twenty bodyguards to protect him. He lived in constant fear of being attacked by us and he knew about the numerous ambushes that we had set up for him. He was extremely cautious and only left his house when accompanied by armed guards. Khaywān was a particularly dangerous area for him, as Khaywān is located directly on the border between Ḥāshid and Sufyān; half of Khaywān belongs to Ḥāshid and the other half to Sufyān. He must have been expecting that the news about his presence would reach us when he went to Khaywān.

them to official authorities or to other tribes. Another option for tribal protection of outsiders is *ṣaḥb*, the permanent integration of the asylum seeker into the host tribe, see Weir 2007: 112–120. The less restrictive and temporary solutions of *ḥaqq al-rabāʿ*, however, appear to have been the method of choice for securing the protection of asylum seekers of various sorts. On the multitudinous forms of tribal refuge, see also Abū Ghānim 1985: 271–282.

One day I received information that he had come to his farm in Khaywān in order to harvest sorghum (*dhurra*). In the small hours of the morning, we snuck into his farm where we lay in wait for his appearance. Before long, at dawn, he arrived, accompanied by his twenty guards, plus his wife and one of his younger sons. The presence of his wife and the child was unfavourable for our cause, but we were weary of chasing him and taking cover in his farm where we had placed an ambush for him, we would have been unable to retreat and come off unnoticed and unscathed.

I was puzzled by how to take revenge from him without killing his family and guards. The opportunity arose half an hour after their arrival, when the guards were asked to lay down their arms and participate in the harvest and the family had disappeared behind an earthen wall. I sent two of my men who approached 'Alī Sa'd* on the pretence of buying his crop. I instructed them to sit next to the arms that the guards had laid on the ground in order to help with the harvest, so they could prevent the guards from reaching their guns after we shot 'Alī Sa'd,* and I told them that we would protect them after killing 'Alī Sa'd.* Indeed our plan succeeded and we shot 'Alī Sa'd* in midst of his guards who, without their weapons, were unable to protect him. Our two men pointed their guns at the guards and told them that they, the tribesmen of Ibn Ḥaydar, would shoot anyone who made a step towards his gun and that we had come to take revenge on 'Alī Sa'd* and not to kill his guards. All of them knew about the revenge issue between us and 'Alī Sa'd.* Hence they stood still and didn't budge. We appeared on the scene and, pointing our guns at 'Alī Sa'd*'s guards, managed to haul our two men safely out of their midst. Before we left, we opened fire on their cars, lest they rescue 'Alī Sa'd* in case he was not dead.

Did he die?

No. 'Alī Sa'd* got three shots through his back. He somehow survived, and later they transferred him to Iraq for medical treatment. His wife was injured when she threw herself above her husband in order to protect him after he was hit. The child died, although it had not been in our line of fire. We did not know how this could have happened, as there was an earthen wall between us and the child.

Seems this hasn't been a fortunate enterprise.

After seven years, we were weary of chasing him. And after the killing of my father, I didn't give a damn. Most important was that I *did* something.

Two years later, in 1990, the third culprit in the case of Ḥasan was brought to justice: ‘Abdallāh Shirārī,* son and successor of Shaykh Muṣliḥ Shirārī* (who had been killed in 1980 by the Dhū Shahwān in revenge for killing one of their tribesmen by the Dhū Shirārī),* and whose death had marked the very beginning of the process of this feud.

There was a large *sidr*⁵² tree in the yard of ‘Abdallāh Shirārī’s* house. Because of the summer heat, the inhabitants of the house slept on the roof. [Since the murder of Ḥasan Ḥaydar in 1981,] ‘Abdallāh’s elderly mother lived in constant fear of ‘Abdallāh’s assassination, and every day, before he left the house, she searched the roads and the area around the house because she dreaded that her son would be ambushed. After the sun had set, I and another man of my *qawm* climbed on the *sidr* tree in front of his house, from which we spotted ‘Abdallāh on the roof talking to three people of his guard before they went to sleep. Yet we could not precisely make them out, for visibility was poor because of the blackness of the night. And whilst we were waiting for ‘Abdallāh and his men to fall asleep, in order to climb onto the roof and kill him, his mother spotted us from one of the windows, without our being aware of her. She informed her son, and he informed his guards, who prepared to open fire on us when they were sure of our presence in the *sidr* tree. He sent his mother with a lantern out into the yard. In our tree, we were wondering what all of them were waiting for on the roof of the house. When his mother saw us from the yard, she started to yell and the guards opened fire. We descended from the *sidr* tree as fast as lightning and hid behind its thick trunk. They fired a hail of bullets at us, but we did not respond, lest we reveal our presence. We stayed behind the trunk because we knew that they wouldn’t even dream of leaving the house in the darkness of the night.

After a quarter of an hour, we heard ‘Abdallāh complaining that in actual fact his mother did not see anyone, and one of his guards said: “Maybe your mother has only fancied Ibn Ḥaydar hiding in the *sidr* tree.” We overheard them wavering on whether we were in the tree or not, because we did not respond to their fire. At last, and fearing to excite the people’s mirth by mistaking a shadow for Ibn Ḥaydar, they decided that ‘Abdallāh’s mother had only imagined our presence. He began to talk

52 Ziziphus spina-christi. The evergreen *sidr* tree is also known as Christ’s Thorn, Jujube, or Nabkh tree. It can reach heights of 3–8 metres, sometimes up to 20 metres, trunk diameters of around 60 cm, and has a very dense leaf canopy.

with his guards in a loud voice, telling them he was convinced that his mother had not seen anyone. We opened fire and fired about 60 rounds towards his voice, and the ensuing gun battle between his guards and my men, who had been waiting for me near the house, lasted for half an hour. Then we withdrew in the dark.

The next day, the news reached us of what had happened: ‘Abdallāh was not hit, but instead he had gone mad. And after some time we saw him with our own eyes, roaming the streets alone and talking to himself, displaying indubitable symptoms of insanity. So we decided to spare him and so far we have not killed him.

Pity for ‘Abdallāh Shirārī* weakened Mujāhid but he had no pity for ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. In the winter of 1992, at the funeral of Shaykh ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī in al-Jawf, and a few days after Mujāhid himself was almost killed in an assassination attempt⁵³ as he was returning from Aden via al-Jawf to Sufyān, he was presented with an unprecedented opportunity to strike down his true enemy – the only enemy that mattered.

The sons of ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī ... invited us to attend their father’s funeral in their home village of Huṣn al-Dayma in al-Jawf. We returned on the second or third day [to al-Jawf] to attend his funeral, and there we spotted a person, his name was Ḥamūd al-Shāyif, who bore striking resemblance to ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, so I thought he was ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar himself, and I told my companions to kill him here and now, amidst the mourners, in order to incite a clash between Bakīl and Ḥāshid, because we, the tribe of Sufyān, were weary of confronting Ḥāshid alone and on our own. And my companions, who were madmen like me, said “alright” (*tamām*).

We moved towards the grave, in which they were about to bury the body of ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī, and this al-Shāyif, who looked like ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, was standing at the bottom of the pit, just receiving the body of ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī in the moment of interment, when a friend of [the tribe of] Dahm saw me. He saw the rage in my face and whispered, “What is wrong with you? You seem quite aghast!”

I said, “Nothing, except this scourge ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar assisting in the burial of al-‘Ukaymī!”

He asked, “‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar? He was not here with us today.”

53 See chapter 4.

I told him, “He indeed joined us, look at the grave, he is just receiving al-‘Ukaymī’s body!”

My Dahm friend gave a nervous titter and said, “This is Ḥamūd al-Shāyif and not ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar,” and he swore that this was the truth. Fortunately, we did not open up another blood debt!

Ḥamūd al-Shāyif, may God rest his soul, came to visit me in 2004 during my detention in the *dīwān* of the Ministry of Interior.⁵⁴ I told him that in 1992 we almost killed him by accident at the funeral of ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī, because of the great resemblance he had to ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, and he laughed heartily and said, “Thank God you did not do it!” [*laughs*]

54 See Chapter 6.

Burdensome Inheritances (1987–1989)

ولكني لم أستطع التعايش معهم على حساب دم أبي واخواني

For I could not coexist with them at the expense of the blood of
my father and my brothers



This chapter, which covers the period from Aḥmad Ḥaydar's death in 1987 until Yemeni unification in 1990, compresses a series of crucial personal, tribal, and political developments into the short span of three years. The fact that, in this book, the broader periods of the preceding and the following chapters occupy a space comparable to those three years after the death of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and the investiture of his son Mujāhid as his successor, reflects the significance of this time in Mujāhid's life.

The first years of Mujāhid's shaykhdom were marked by his efforts to establish his position as the leader of his tribe and to exact revenge on *bayt al-Aḥmar* for the deaths of his father and his brothers. At the same time, the political drama of the coming years began to unfold when President Ṣāliḥ approached the young shaykh and tried to include him in his patronage networks, in order to use his desire for retribution to control the growing power of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. For this purpose, Ṣāliḥ approached Mujāhid and tested the possibility of their relationship from a number of angles and by using different techniques and measures; first he tried to win Mujāhid over, then he took a coercive and threatening position. His dealings with Mujāhid exemplify the very essence of Ṣāliḥ's "tribal politics" and the spectrum of manipulative techniques he employed in order to strengthen his power vis-à-vis the tribes. When rapprochement failed despite Ṣāliḥ's efforts, a period of instability followed, characterized by tribal unrest and armed insurrections, it produced grievances and resentments among the tribe of Sufyān (and many other tribes) that continued to sour relations between them and the regime well beyond the end of the YAR.

All this happened against the background of a short but politically important period. On the level of macropolitics, the years covered by this chapter

correspond to what Dunbar calls the “fourth phase” of Yemeni unity efforts, in which, after a brief period of renewed tensions in 1987–88, unification was advanced with renewed vigour.¹ Šāliḥ’s negotiation position towards their southern sister state was relatively solid at that time: the bloody infightings in Aden in 1986, after which the southern ex-President ‘Alī Nāṣir Muḥammad and several thousand of his supporters had fled to the YAR, presented him with a useful tool to pressure the southern *shaṭr*.² Whereas the YAR was undergoing a phase of relative economic prosperity, the PDRY suffered from a prolonged economic crisis – Sinān Abū Laḥūm described Aden of those years as a “ghost town” (*madīnat ashbāḥ*).³ On the domestic level, the denouement of the War of the Central Areas and Šāliḥ’s policy of co-optation and patronage of many, yet by no means all, tribal leaders had produced some notable successes. However, the increasing interpenetration of state and tribal interests also strengthened the grip of some major shaykhs on state institutions and organs, as their ability to interfere in the government and curb its scope for action grew.⁴ ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, in particular, distinguished himself as a fierce antagonist of Šāliḥ’s policy of rapprochement with the socialist South.⁵ In their complicated relationship, which was marked by cooperation and mistrust, President Šāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar both had a vested interest in maintaining the system only to a point, provided the other did not become too dominant. Šāliḥ considered the blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar a piece in the jigsaw puzzle he was putting together, a piece that he needed to implement in order to control and constrain the power of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar.

Mujāhid once called the years after the assassination of his father the most momentous time of his life. Certainly they were also the most important years, for they formed the idea of shaykhdom to which he clung afterwards. When attempts at rapprochement between him and Šāliḥ failed, the principle of opposition began to shape Mujāhid’s life just as it had his father’s. His rejectionist attitude towards the ruling system became, in fact, so dominant that it

1 According to Dunbar (1992: 459–460), the “fourth phase” of unity efforts lasted from 1988 to 1990. On this period, see also Brehony 2011: 151–167. The main reason for the renewed tensions between the PDRY and the YAR in late 1987 and early 1988 related to issues of oil exploration in common frontier areas that were not demarcated and the YAR’s participation in the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC); for the latter see Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 51–52.

2 Brehony 2011: 151–153.

3 Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 3: 352.

4 Dunbar 1992: 468.

5 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 242.

accounts for the impression his life gives, despite his desire for political action and strategic alliances that characterized later phases of his life.

1 The Time of the Raids (1987)

Nothing contributed so greatly to render Mujāhid's choices seditious and war-like as the period at the beginning of his career, when shaykhdom became his lot as the result of a blood feud with the most powerful tribal family in post-1962 Yemen, a feud to which three of his elder brothers and his father had fallen victim. Catapulted as a fourteen-year-old to the top of an intractable tribe, and entrusted with the duty of avenging the blood of his kin on *bayt* al-Aḥmar, he became a focal point of the politics of manipulation and machinations that kept President Ṣāliḥ in power. Mujāhid's premature exposure to the dark sides of power, and his resilience and resistance to political attempts to exploit his cause, explain his subsequent path of opposition to the regime that became the theme of his life.

When Aḥmad Ḥaydar met his violent death, his remaining sons Mujāhid and Fayṣal were enrolled in school in Saraḥāt al-Matūn in al-Jawf. Despite the tense situation prevailing since the successive murders of their brothers and the conflict with the Dhū 'Aybān,* the news of their father's assassination seems to have caught them unawares. Mujāhid recalled the day when he learned of his father's death.

When I was at school, I was surprised when a large host of our tribesmen descended to al-Jawf.⁶ We had no telephones in those days. I had only to look at them to know that something was dreadfully wrong. I welcomed them and asked them why they would visit me in these numbers. They said, "Your father sent us to take you back home." I took my clothes and my personal weapon and went with them. When we reached Sufyān, masses of people were gathering at the graveyard of Jassār near Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a. At this sight I froze with terror. People came and offered me their condolences, others worked on filling my father's grave. Later on that day, those who had come from afar returned to their home villages. But most of them stayed with me and kept watch over me in a vigil. They did not leave me to sleep alone and remained sitting at my side all night long.

6 Large parts of the Jawf depression, with the exception of the Baraṭ plateau, are lower in altitude than Sufyān, hence the way from Sufyān to al-Matūn is considered to be a "descent."

Mujāhid passed the night thus. The day after the funeral of his father, their tribal segment gathered in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal'a to elect Mujāhid as his successor. Mujāhid was fourteen years old when he was entrusted with the position of the senior shaykh of Dhū Aḥmad, the senior shaykh of Sufyān's Ruhm moiety, and pretender to the title of the long contested position of the senior shaykh of Sufyān.

The next morning, the tribesmen and [the other] shaykhs of Dhū Aḥmad gathered in order to elect me as their new shaykh. Because of my grief, I was still petrified as though turned to stone. I did not want to be elected. I did not want to become the shaykh. Grief made me deaf and blind to all but one subject: that was revenge.

The fact that his father had died a violent death made Mujāhid his undisputed successor. Normally a tribe elects its shaykh from the agnates of the lineage in which the office of the shaykh is hereditary. Because of the absence of a strict and exclusive pattern of succession, such as primogeniture, succession of a shaykhdom is not always passed on from the father to one of his sons, but can be transferred to any eligible person of the deceased shaykh's extended lineage.⁷ In this case, however, the assassination of the shaykh and looming blood vengeance necessitated the investiture of one of his sons as his successor. In this way the tribe ensured that the position of the shaykh and that of the "blood custodian" (*walī l-dam*), the one responsible for exacting vengeance, coincided in one and the same person.

After the assassination of a shaykh, it is custom for the tribe to gather and elect his eldest son as his successor, and at that time I was my father's eldest remaining son. In the days after my father's funeral, our tribal segment convened in my home village. Because the assassination of a shaykh is a black disgrace, normally a tribe accepts the succession of the son by consensus, and this is what happened to me. After my election, the elders of Dhū Aḥmad set up a document confirming my shaykhdom, bearing their signatures and fingerprints, and the *dawshān* announced my investiture in Sufyān's *sūqs* and public places.

⁷ Shaykhly succession is both hereditary and elective, see Dostal 1974: 7–9; Abū Ghānim 1985: 251–298; Gingrich 1989: 195–210; Dresch 1989: 99–106; Weir 2007: 97–204; and Brandt 2014a: 95–98. According to tribal traditions, the shaykh is considered "primus inter pares" (Gingrich and Heiss 1986: 19), whose investiture and performance must be approved by the members of his tribal constituency.

The *dawshān*, a kind of tribal herald, was sent to proclaim the death of the old shaykh and the election of his successor – similar to the proclamation “The king is dead, long live the king” formerly made in many European countries following the death of a monarch and the accession of his successor.⁸ In doing so, the *dawshān* emphasized the continuity of the hereditary leadership position of *bayt* Ḥaydar, as well as the legal fact that after the death of the deceased shaykh the office was transferred to his successor.

The gathering in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a was the first of two tribal convocations necessary to establish Mujāhid as the full successor to his father’s positions. The day after his father’s funeral, he was elected senior shaykh of Dhū Aḥmad. Two years later, during the “war of Nūriyya” in 1989, in a second, much larger tribal gathering, the whole tribe of Sufyān also confirmed Mujāhid’s succession to the position of senior shaykh of Sufyān’s Ruhm moiety, one of the two highest-ranking positions in the tribal structure of Sufyān.⁹

The election ceremony as a “rite of passage” marked Mujāhid’s departure from childhood and school life to his passage into adult life and the

8 In the tribal societies of Yemen, the *dawshān* is a herald of non-tribal, i.e., “vulnerable” status. The *dawshān* belongs to the social category of the *ahl al-khums*, see Serjeant 1977: 231–232. The *dawshān* of an individual tribe is only permitted to move about within the tribal area – e.g., Sufyān’s *dawshān* only circulates within the territory of the Sufyān. He makes proclamations for the shaykh, eulogizes people of note on social occasions, often in rhymed prose, and announces weddings and funerals. Chelhod (1970: 75) thinks their name originated from the expression *dhū sha’n* (“one with an issue”) which then evolved into *dawshān*. Not all tribes in Yemen perceive of the position of *dawshān* in the same way. According to Chelhod (1985: 30), the profession of *dawshān* did not exist in Ṣa’da until 1974. In Munabbih, in the 1980s the position of the *dawshān* was unknown, see Gingrich 1989: 129. With regard to Mujāhid, I noticed that he vividly recalled a *dawshān* by the name of Muḥammad Nūbī who regularly took action at key points in Mujāhid’s life. At my request, he further explained the *dawshān*’s special role: “Muḥammad Nūbī was a famous *dawshān*, who later on worked for the Red Crescent [Red Cross]. During a war, as a *dawshān*, according to tribal customary law he had the right to move between the parties to the conflict, to provide services, and to rescue the injured from a battlefield. In a war between two tribes, the *dawshān* has the right to aid the wounded, remove those killed, and provide all kinds of service[s] and food. He may transfer correspondence between the parties to the conflict until their reconciliation.” This basically corresponds with al-‘Alimī’s (1988: 78, 83) description of the *dawshān*’s roles and tasks.

9 The senior shaykh of Sufyān’s other moiety, al-Ṣubāra, traditionally comes from *bayt* Ḥubaysh, which is as noble, ancient, and deep-rooted as *bayt* Ḥaydar of Ruhm (see Dresch 1989: 202–204). The question of which of the two shaykhly houses is more important and thus takes the position of *shaykh mashāyikh* (senior shaykh) of Sufyān is largely a matter of opinion and changes over the time; habitually both *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* Ḥubaysh have claimed this position at various times.

responsibilities of the shaykh.¹⁰ To be a Ḥaydar and a shaykh of Sufyān was like being placed under an evil star. The heir of this ancient, prominent lineage was born into an unsettling time in the borders of a truculent tribe. His great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and three of his brothers had met violent deaths. The conflict between Sufyān and al-‘Uṣaymāt for the disputed lands in Wādī Ḥabṭā’, the blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, and the conflict with the Dhū ‘Aybān* dragged on. It seemed that *bayt* Ḥaydar was surrounded by unrest, and unrest raged perpetually amidst its tribe.

Tribal governance is both a competitive and cooperative enterprise, and the institution of the “co-governing team” formed by the shaykh and his counsellors helped the young shaykh grow into his role. The collective character of tribal governance enables the institution of shaykhdom to survive times of transition and disruptions in leadership.¹¹ After his election, Mujāhid was supported by the advisers of his late father: a number of knowledgeable and experienced elders of Dhū Aḥmad and other segments of Ruhm. They had helped Aḥmad Ḥaydar administer his tribe, and now assisted his young successor.

The counsellors of my father were at my side. They remained with me after my father’s murder and continued to do so until their deaths. I profited from their experience and their knowledge of tribal law and custom (*‘urf wa-silf*) and the relations between the tribes. The intimate knowledge of the tribes and their affairs and positions was vital to our survival, because of the conflict with the regime and the blood revenge issue between us and *bayt* al-Aḥmar. [In dealing with the other shaykhs,] we constantly and incessantly checked and rechecked the true and the untrue [among the shaykhs] through their words and deeds.

Mujāhid and his counsellors were well aware that difficult tasks lay ahead. The government in Sanaa also closely monitored the situation in Sufyān. A few days after the funeral of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, Ṣāliḥ sent an envoy to Mujāhid to offer him his condolences, assert his innocence of the crime, and prevent the tribe of Sufyān from linking the government to the death of Aḥmad Ḥaydar. Already at this juncture, Ṣāliḥ’s plan to exploit the incident for his own purposes and

10 In cultural anthropology, the term *rite of passage* is the Anglicization of *rite de passage*, a French term innovated by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his work *Les rites de passage* (1909).

11 On tribal leadership as a cooperative and collective enterprise and the roles and responsibilities of the counsellors of a shaykh, see al-‘Alīmī 1988: 80; Gingrich 1989: 128–129; and Weir 2007: 68–69, 79.

further sow seeds of division and discord between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar began to surface.

For a period of one month, we received mourners from among the shaykhs of Bakil and other tribes. Five days after the funeral of my father, Shaykh ‘Abdallāh Dāris delivered an invitation for a meeting with Ṣāliḥ in Sanaa, but I refused to accept. I was still horrified by the death of my father. Ṣāliḥ responded by sending military leaders and cars loaded with foodstuffs, sheep, and money. I received the military leaders, but I did not accept the gifts that came with them. Some tribal elders came to me and took the gifts, telling me that it is *‘ayb* (disgrace) to send them back. The military leaders worked to convince me that Ṣāliḥ was not involved in the killing of my father and placed sole responsibility for his death on ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar.

Ṣāliḥ’s attentiveness to the situation in Sufyān was justified. After the death of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, the wrath of the Sufyān was directed at his murderers and those they suspected of being the mastermind of the whole affair: ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. Under the provisions of *ḥukm al-muḥaddash*¹² – eleven-fold penalties for certain types of murders that are considered particularly disgraceful – the feud’s potential for destabilization further multiplied. According to the legal interpretation of the Sufyān, enraged by the gross disgraces inflicted on their shaykhly family and collective honour, the killing of Mujāhid’s brother Ḥasan in 1981 alone, which marked the very beginning of the feud, led to an enormous blood debt, and two other brothers were killed, Ḥaydar and Ḥāmis. In addition, the assassination of Mujāhid’s father and their senior shaykh was also considered a black disgrace, for which eleven-fold penalties were due. The number of black disgraces inflicted on *bayt* Ḥaydar had reached dizzying heights, such that the affair could no longer be solved through mediation and material compensation. The reputation (*naqā’*) of *bayt* Ḥaydar was at stake and could only be restored by the taking of blood.

At this juncture the Sufyān faced an exceptional situation. By 1987, the potential for conflict that had accumulated in Sufyān transgressed the dimensions of a petty tribal feud or an affair of honour and exchange of well-calculated blows of violence between hostile families or tribal segments. Exacerbated by the political power of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his backing by the state, and the particular viciousness that had evolved between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar

12 On *ḥukm al-muḥaddash*, see chapter 2.

since 1981, the feud had reached a scale exceeding local rules of engagement; it threatened to go far beyond the common escalation level of tribal conflict and to rekindle the dangerous and long-standing hostility between Bakīl and Ḥāshid.¹³

After my father was killed, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar called on those shaykhs of Ḥāshid who were his friends to leave their home villages and relocate to Sanaa¹⁴ because he dreaded a sweeping attack [of Sufyān] on Ḥāshid to avenge the killing of my father and my brothers. Yet my counsellors strongly advised against summoning the tribe of Sufyān for an all-out attack on Ḥāshid, lest it cause the death of masses of innocent Ḥāshid tribesmen. Instead, we agreed on targeting those whom we suspected of being behind the deaths of my father and my brothers. I set up a team of tribesmen, seasoned men, utterly without fear, known for their fierceness and fighting prowess. We left for the mountain pass Naqīl al-Ghūla that separates the territory of Bakīl from Ḥāshid to the south. At Naqīl al-Ghūla we entrenched ourselves in a place that overlooked the road, and there we lay in wait for members of *bayt* al-Aḥmar and *bayt* Abū Shawārib. We stayed there for a long time, monitoring the movements on the mountain pass, but none [of them] came, or they were too heavily guarded. Eventually, we grew weary of waiting and went home.

Why Abū Shawārib?

Because Mujāhid Abū Shawārib had a hidden hand in killing my brother Ḥasan [in 1981]. We did not merely suspect it. We knew it.¹⁵

13 On the levels of violence in honour-bound societies, see Jamous 1991.

14 By virtue of its *hijra* status, the (formerly walled) city of Sanaa carries the epithet *makhzan al-ru'ūs* (head store) – a metaphor for its status as a sanctuary for those threatened by blood revenge, see Serjeant 1983: 39–43 and ‘Umar 2004: 186–187. On the institution of the *hijra* as a protected space, see Puin 1984.

15 Indeed, there are striking parallels between Ḥasan Ḥaydar’s assassination in 1981 and the assassination of Mujāhid Abū Shawārib’s father, Yahyā, who was assassinated by the Sufyān in 1951. Khadija al-Salami (2003: 228–230) recorded Abū Shawārib’s version of this incident, according to which the Sufyān lured Yahyā Abū Shawārib into the wilderness and killed him there. His body was abandoned in a depression and discovered a few days later by his son Mujāhid Abū Shawārib. This strong sense of symbolism and visual parity can be observed time and again in the history of crime in Yemen. The assassination of Nāji l-Ghādir in the Bayḥān massacre of 1972 is another case in which the extravagant setting of his assassination was a cruel and dazzling mise-en-scène of a famous *zāmil*, see Brandt 2021: 10. The killing of ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ in 2017 by the Ḥūthi in some ways corresponded with the assassination of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthi in 2004. Both were killed by a gunshot point blank to the head, and very similar close-up photos of their bodies circulated in the media. Ṣāliḥ’s death not only matched the killing of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthi, but the visuals of

A few days later, we decided to head directly to Dhī Bīn [in Khārīf of Ḥāshid], the village of Mujāhid Abū Shawārib, with the aim of breaking into his house and killing him. Two of my sentries had been observing and reconnoitring the house and its environs and informed us when Mujāhid Abū Shawārib was at home. After driving a long distance on a gruelling rough track, we reached Dhī Bīn and broke into his house. But we did not find him. They told us that he had left one hour before. We only found his brother ‘Askar Abū Shawārib, and in the far distance we saw a foreign woman fleeing on a horse. They told us that she was the French wife of ‘Askar Abū Shawārib, this is what they said. We did not kill him [his brother ‘Askar] because he was a weak man who mattered to no one, and our chivalry (*shahāma*) did not allow us to kill a weak man. His death would not have enraged the tribe of Ḥāshid, nor would it have taught them the taste of pain. So we raised the barrels of our guns skyward, and did not shoot.

On our return, we came across the house of a Ḥāshid shaykh called Ibn Ḥājib. We did not find him, but we found his brother, who beseeched us not to kill him, and as a result, we spared him and made do with firing a single shot at his right hand.¹⁶ He dropped his weapon and we took him with us as a captive. I continued to roam with my men in order to get experience and, if possible, to avenge my kin and kill my enemies with my own hands. This was my way to ease my grief. My counsellors worked hard to hold my impulse in check and prevent me from accompanying my tribesmen on these raids, but I enforced my will and went with them to take revenge.

Armed raids (pl. *maghāzī*) are a phenomenon that occurs far more frequently among the semi-nomadic societies of Sufyān’s sister tribe Dahm in al-Jawf and among the desert tribes of the Empty Quarter.¹⁷ Among the sedentary tribes of highland Yemen, with their well-defined borders and strong agricultural background, armed raids are very rare. Their occurrence in 1987 indicates the

their slain bodies also corresponded in a striking way; in some way, parity was restored in more than one sense. See Brandt 2021: 64.

16 They shot at his hand because he pointed a weapon at them.

17 On tribal raiding in Yemen, see, for example, Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 1: 52–54 and Dresch 2006 (passim). In his study on the Shāhsevan of Iran, Tapper (1986) argues that raiding activities, regardless of their complex political backgrounds, greatly contribute to the hostile stereotypes found in historical accounts on tribes; this obviously also applies to the Yemeni context.

exceptional situation ‘Amrān province faced at that time: a kind of death squad of the Sufyān was spreading fear and terror among the Ḥāshid tribes in ‘Amrān, undertaking armed forays into Ḥāshid lands, causing havoc by wreaking vengeance on members of the rival group, breaking into the houses of Ḥāshid shaykhs, and shooting at and abducting uninvolved people.

Ultimately, it was the concerted precautions of the major Ḥāshid shaykhs, who temporarily relocated to Sanaa to elude a confrontation with Sufyān’s avengers, and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s capacity to recruit large armed escorts, that continued to frustrate Mujaḥid’s attempts at exacting revenge. For the time, his attempts to avenge the deaths of his father and his brothers floundered. After some time, and without having achieved anything, he and his men returned to Sufyān, mourning the dead, nursing their grievances, forgetting nothing, and forgiving less.

2 The Godfather (1988)

In summer 1988, when tensions in ‘Amrān seemed to have subsided, President Ṣāliḥ decided the time had come to re-extend his invitation and translate Mujaḥid’s horrifying experiences of the past into a close and mutually beneficial bond with the very centre of power. In place of ‘Abdallāh Dāris, who – though unwittingly – had led Mujaḥid’s father to his death in 1987, Ṣāliḥ dispatched the shaykhs Ṣāliḥ Hindī Dughṣān of Dahm and Muḥammad Ibn Shājiā’ of Wā’ilah to the Sufyān, and entrusted them with the task of delivering the invitation and ensuring – as his guarantors (*ḍumanā*) – the safe conduct of Mujaḥid’s voyage.¹⁸ The shaykhs managed to convince Mujaḥid to accept Ṣāliḥ’s invitation. For this meeting with Mujaḥid, who was fifteen at the time, Ṣāliḥ chose the rather intimate setting of one of his private houses called *bayt al-dajāj* (“chicken house”) in Sha‘ūb neighbourhood, rather than a more formal reception in the republican palace. Obviously, their conversation was not meant for the ears of others, even the guarantors were not allowed to listen.

18 Muḥammad Ibn Shājiā’ and Ṣāliḥ Hindī Dughṣān were close friends of Aḥmad Ḥaydar, and Mujaḥid called them “dearest people.” Ṣāliḥ Hindī Dughṣān was also involved in the NDF rebellion, see Lichenthäler 2003: 63–64. Mujaḥid later married one of Dughṣān’s daughters. Muḥammad Ibn Shājiā’ became notorious in the late 1990s when he spear-headed tribal protests and acts of sabotage against the border Treaty of Jeddah; he also colluded with Osama Bin Laden, see Bergen 2001: 184, 191–192; al-Enazy 2005: 240 n. 4, 241 n. 7, 241 n. 9, 243 n. 18; and Brandt 2017a: 86–90, 92–93. Both shaykhs were assassinated.

The sole witness to their conversation was Ghālib Muṭahhar al-Qamish, head of the Political Security Organization (PSO).

Ṣāliḥ said many words about his innocence of the killing of my father. He said that, while he had not been his friend, only a fool would doubt my father's honour and honesty. He insisted that this was a tribal issue [between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar] that he had nothing to do with, and that any desire to conspire against my father was far from him. He gave me the military rank of a first lieutenant, a six-month scholarship for my schooling, monthly salaries for my tribal guards, and a water project for my village. He invited me to let him know if there was any other benefit I would ask of him. He wanted me to have a taste of how it is to belong to him.

Ṣāliḥ offered Mujāhid these personal and financial benefits that were meant to form the foundation of a relationship of dependence. In Yemen, as in much of Middle Eastern politics, state-financed shaykhs have been a fixture for centuries. Yet financial patronage was always a double-edged sword: rather than “nurturing” the tribal system, patronage was meant to drive a wedge between the shaykhs and their tribal home constituencies by generating differences in status and wealth between them and their tribesmen, whose economic situation and living conditions often were and remained dire.¹⁹ For the shaykhs, the elevation and insulation from their tribal communities and their daily affairs was a mixed blessing, as the influx of wealth and their orientation towards the capital often weakened their authority and influence in their often faraway tribal constituencies. From the point of view of the state, this was a welcome side effect of patronage because fragmented tribes without strong leaders were weak and did not pose much threat.

What really counted for a tribe, and what Mujāhid strived to attain from Ṣāliḥ, was *tawẓīf*, the (mass) employment of tribesmen in the military and public administration. Only *tawẓīf* allowed a tribe to penetrate into sensitive areas of the military and administrative apparatus, thus profiting sustainably as a whole. The tribes that were granted this access were of course handpicked; they were exclusively Ḥāshid tribes, and of the Ḥāshid only Sanḥān (Ṣāliḥ's tribe) and Hamdān Sanaa (the tribe of his predecessor al-Ghashmī).²⁰ Only

19 On the process of *tabaʿud* (“distancing”) between the major shaykhs and their tribes, see also Dunbar 1992: 468 and Dresch 1995: 38.

20 On Sanḥān (and, to a lesser degree, Hamdān) dominance in the government and military, see Phillips 2011a: 88–93; and Day 2012: 89, 95.

these were regarded as truly trustworthy tribes. It was desirable for Šāliḥ to tie Mujaḥid to himself and make him amenable through material dependence, but giving him and the unruly Sufyān a foothold in his exclusive circle of confidants was positively out of the question.

Šāliḥ's master plan for Mujaḥid rather resembled his approach toward Muḥammad al-Ghādir and Šādiq Abū Rās. After the violent deaths of their fathers Nāji l-Ghādir (senior shaykh of Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, d. 1972) and Amīn Abū Rās (senior shaykh of Dhū Muḥammad of Dahm and also considered senior shaykh of the Bakīl confederation, d. 1978), whose killings remain shrouded in mystery and were never properly investigated, Šāliḥ took on the role of the saviour and godfather vis-à-vis their sons, offering them a helping hand that would elevate them from misery and looming marginalization.²¹ From the perspective of the state, patronage thus helped to disarm powerful contenders among the shaykhs, who otherwise might have evolved into a threat to the regime. The effect among the tribes of Dahm and Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl was basically the same: Šāliḥ gave the sons wealth and political offices in Sanaa, and by doing so, insulated them from their tribes, who were no longer as strong and united as they had been under the guidance of their fathers. In this way, the tribes were deprived of strong tribal leaders, and fell prey to fragmentation and political manipulation.

It was Šāliḥ's policy to kill the father and reap the son. His policy was killing or otherwise ruining the great shaykhs who were opposed to him and patronizing their sons and making them obedient. Šāliḥ's policies were guided by a certain basic pattern; he contributed to the killing of a shaykh who did not march to his tune (*lā yamshī 'alā kayfihi*), and then leaked information to the sons of the slain shaykh that he was innocent and that al-Aḥmar was guilty of the crime. He conned his way into the confidence of the son by creating facts that discredited al-Aḥmar and reflected adversely on al-Aḥmar's integrity. Of course he killed in an intelligent and hidden way without giving reasonable grounds to suspect his involvement. Šāliḥ considered this method the best way to control the Bakīl bogeyman (*al-ba'ba' al-bakīlī*). He feared that the undisguised

21 During the 1960s civil war, both Nāji l-Ghādir (royalist) and Amīn Abū Rās (republican) claimed the position of the senior shaykh of the Bakīl confederation. Nāji l-Ghādir was assassinated in 1972 in the so called Bayḥān massacre, see Brandt 2019. Amīn Abū Rās, a close associate of former president Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, was poisoned in 1978. After his ascent to power in 1978, Šāliḥ patronized their sons Muḥammad al-Ghādir and Šādiq Abū Rās and facilitated their political careers in the GPC apparatus.

killing of the shaykhs of Bakīl would make the Bakīl unite against him and remove him from power. In this way, Ṣāliḥ manipulated the sons of the slain shaykhs and managed to push them in the direction in which their fathers had refused to go. And Ṣāliḥ aimed at dealing with me in the same way.

This was not the only point of contention between Ṣāliḥ and Mujāhid. In the course of their conversation, it surfaced that Ṣāliḥ's demonstrative compassion had a quota of spurious compassion and hypocrisy, as the boons he offered came at a price and would only be granted in exchange for certain concessions. By latching on to the provisions of tribal customary law, Ṣāliḥ came forward with a proposal concerning the blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar; he presented a request with seemingly enigmatic intentions, at least at that time. However gentle his words, there were darker motives underneath.

Ṣāliḥ told me that he was innocent of any desire to kill my father and that he had nothing to do with his murder. He said he would stand with me and support me if I listen to him and implement his demands, which turned out to be utterly unacceptable for me. He requested that I postpone the pursuit of avenging my father and my brothers and demanded a *ṣulḥ* [truce] between me and *bayt* al-Aḥmar for a period of fifteen years.

Ṣāliḥ's demand derived its substance from a certain clause in tribal customary law that allows the deferment of a blood debt for a specified period of time.²² This deferment is referred to as *ṣulḥ* (truce), during such an arranged period no revenge killing takes place between the opponents. According to tribal custom, this truce does not constitute a settlement of the case, rather it is an agreement between the opponents in which they pledge to cease fighting for a limited period of time.

In tribal customary law there is a case called "respect for socially important persons" (*iḥtirām li-l-shakhsiyyāt al-ijtimā'iyya al-kubrā*). Such a person may ask the avenger to grant his enemy a certain period of truce as a human duty in order to alleviate the suffering of that enemy and to

22 Hartley (1961: 181) observed a similar custom among the Nahd tribe of Ḥaḍramawt: "A truce (*ṣulḥ*) brings into effect a short suspension of hostilities, during which all past incidents of raiding and killing are said to remain 'between' the two parties but rights of retaliation are held in abeyance. By a truce both parties agree to abstain from hostile acts for a specific period, usually six months, after which the truce can be renewed."

give him the opportunity to leave his home and to return to it safely so that he can arrange his personal affairs, gather food reserves, and the like [before the process of blood revenge sets in]. According to the type of the case, the truce may be valid for a period of one month, two months, six months, one year, two years, and more. The avenger has the right to refuse and not grant a truce. People deal with this matter according to the type of crime: if it was wilful murder, the avenger [often] refuses to grant his enemy a truce. If the killing was a matter of self-defence, the avenger understands and grants the opponent a temporary truce.

Although at this time Mujāhid did not yet fathom the rationale behind Šāliḥ's request, the call for a deferment of the blood debt contradicted his sense of justice and deeply held values of honour and dignity.

I refused [to grant a truce] because I suspected that Šāliḥ had a hidden hand in the murder of my father and my brothers. Instead, I demanded that he enforce [state] law to prosecute the killers who lived in Sanaa under the protection of the state and received monthly salaries from the government for carrying out these murders. The killers' rewards and salaries came from the state treasury and were granted by Šāliḥ. The killers were in Sanaa with 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar in al-Ḥaṣaba neighbourhood, protected by the state that also rewarded them with privileges, military ranks, and state jobs. I demanded that Šāliḥ arrest them and put them on trial and enforce justice rather than asking me for a fifteen-year truce.

A further issue engendered Mujāhid's suspicion, namely, the very way Šāliḥ wanted to deal with the conflict between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the feud that had just proven its potential to generate the kind of crisis that sent shock waves through highland Yemen. The question arose as to why Šāliḥ would not use his presidential power to work towards achieving *ḥilf* (alliance; in this case, reconciliation, peace) between them and pacifying 'Amrān province by channelling the blood feud toward mediation and litigation. In contrast to a *ṣulḥ*, a *ḥilf* would erase all blood debts between the two families. Moreover, the unusual length of the truce requested by Šāliḥ – fifteen years, until 2003 – was an indication that his request was politically motivated. Šāliḥ's show of solidarity with Mujāhid was histrionics, and his appeals to good tribal practice was only designed to cover his manipulative approach. Šāliḥ's proposal was not about giving 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar the opportunity to organize his personal affairs before the revenge process continued, rather it was meant to steer the

retributive thrust of *bayt* Ḥaydar and the tribe of Sufyān toward a particular purpose.

At that time, I did not yet fathom Ṣāliḥ's true intention. Only years later I understood that he had been trying to transform my mission of active revenge into a sleeper case that he would activate at a time of his choosing, in order to use it against 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. He planned to rekindle my revenge as a means of removing 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar from power at an appropriate time. There was the issue of his son, Aḥmad Ṣāliḥ, whom he wanted to bring into position. This meant his plan for dynastic succession had been in place a long time. The succession of his son Aḥmad was a subject of disagreement between Ṣāliḥ and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. Ṣāliḥ knew that al-Aḥmar would never accept it, so when Aḥmad's time came he wanted to be able to get rid of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. And Ṣāliḥ knew that only we, the tribe of Sufyān, were capable of destroying *bayt* al-Aḥmar.

The assassination of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and Ṣāliḥ's attempts to form an alliance with his heir coincided with a period of fundamental political disagreement between Ṣāliḥ and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar; this disagreement revolved around issues of Yemeni unification and presidential succession. At that time, the policy of rapprochement between the Yemeni sister states had gained new momentum and – for the first time since the 1960s – unification seemed to have had a genuine chance of success. Ṣāliḥ had an instinct for political changes and the moment when a situation turned in his favour. His awareness of the unique historical and political opportunity was combined with his vested interests. He viewed Yemeni unity and the three million partly detribalized southerners as a welcome counterbalance to the influence of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and some other influential northern shaykhs. Likewise, the southern armed forces were considered more disciplined and loyal than the northern army, and, above all, the southern army had not been infiltrated by the northern tribes.²³

'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, on the other hand, had been a fierce opponent of Yemeni unity and had been instrumental in thwarting efforts at unification since the early 1970s.²⁴ His aversion to the PDRY and socialism was irreconcilable, as he saw the fundamentals of his being, thinking, and acting (that is, tribalism and Islam) threatened by the political and ideological system of the PDRY, which he vilified as being based on “atheist-communist-opportunist-anarchist

23 Dunbar 1992: 469–470.

24 Dunbar 1992: 468.

thinking" (*fikr ilhādī shaywa'ī intihāzī fawḍawī*).²⁵ His cooperation with Ṣālīḥ, which had begun during the 1978 Nasirist coup attempt against Ṣālīḥ and the jointly waged border war of 1979 and the War of the Central Areas against the NDF, was (in his view) based above all on their common fight against the "atheistic," "alien" South²⁶ – and now Ṣālīḥ planned to abandon their basic consensus and shift the power balance in his favour by uniting with the "godless," anti-tribal PDRY.

And there was a further factor in play. In the years preceding Yemeni unification in 1990, Ṣālīḥ presided over a political system which, although it was called a republic (*jumhūrīyya*), increasingly resembled an autocratic, patrimonial state.²⁷ Many believe that his intention to create a dynasty for himself was long-standing, but was only pursued openly after Ṣālīḥ signed the Jeddah border treaty in 2000 and felt reassured that the Saudis would not plot against him.²⁸ In the late 1980s when he first began to nurture the idea of succession by his eldest son Aḥmad (b. 1972) he had to face the issue of legitimacy that overshadowed his presidency. In the history of Yemen, there was little precedent for his succession plans. The imamate had based its legitimacy on Zaydi tenets, but the YAR had been largely unsuccessful in developing forms of political and ideological legitimacy. Ṣālīḥ was not yet legitimized by democratic elections. Neither tribal customs nor Zaydism supported primogeniture or dynastic succession.²⁹ The Salafis, however, would most likely support his plans, as long as

25 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 242. When 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar could not prevent Yemeni unity in 1990, his resistance focused on the dispute over paragraph 3 of the constitution that determines whether *shar'ī'a* law should be the sole source or the principal source of law in unified Yemen, see Abū Lahūm 2004: vol. 4: 28–32.

26 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 238. See also chapter 1.

27 This phenomenon surfaced in many other "sham democracies" in North Africa and the Middle East. In Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya the republics began to look more like monarchies, a condition captured by Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddine Ibrahim's minted word *gumlikiyya* – meaning a state that is half republic and half monarchy. In contrast to other states in the Middle East, however, the YAR's weakness required a much more elaborate practice of accommodation, negotiation, and compromise, see Owen 2012.

28 The Ṭā'if border treaty of 1934 was a temporary settlement of the border conflict between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, to be renewed every twenty (lunar) years. In 2000, the Treaty of Jeddah acknowledged the provisions of the Ṭā'if Treaty as final, permanent, and non-renewable; see Schofield 2000 and al-Enazy 2005.

29 Zaydi Hādawī doctrine does not support dynastic rule. Since the seventeenth century CE, however, Sunni elements were integrated into the Zaydi school of law; this eliminated some of the theological doctrines of Zaydism, such as the Hādawī doctrine that the supreme rulership (*imāma*) was not inherited and dynastic succession was impossible; see Haykel 2003. For this reason some Zaydi scholars have criticized the two dynasties

he supported theirs.³⁰ Šālih's plan to groom his son to take over the presidency required cautious, far-sighted, clandestine preparations, including manipulations and political manoeuvres and an elaborate practice of accommodation, compromise, and negotiation with internal challengers and foes. For this reason, he wanted Mujāhid to refrain from undertaking immediate revenge and rather act as his secret weapon, the ace in his sleeve, the card he could play should the friction with 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar become unworkable in his plan. He was convinced that anything could be produced if he only moved the right pieces at the right moment.

All this scheming [was] in order to pass his power on to his son. [Šālih even risked] wars, poverty, and [letting his country slip into] backwardness in order to secure the succession of his son. How wrong he was! If he worked properly and built a nation and provided justice and stability and development, the Yemeni people would have loved him even before Aḥmad came to power. And [later on] al-Ḥuthī would not have come.

And now he tried to exploit the killing of my father and to buy me with stipends and a military rank and salaries for my tribal guards. He wanted to harness my cause to his own advantage. But I rebelled, even if it cost me dearly. For I could not coexist with them at the expense of my father's and my brothers' blood.

3 The War of Nūriyya (1989)

If Mujāhid had been morally shocked by the killings of his brothers and his father, after their meeting his respect for the president had plummeted. Instead of bringing about reconciliation, cooperation, and a relation of confidence, the encounter had only served to increase the antagonism between them. For Šālih their meeting had been a total failure. While Mujāhid had accepted a military rank, the water project, and salaries for his tribal guards, he had rejected Šālih's

(the Qāsimī and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasties) that ruled highland Yemen from the mid-seventeenth century until 1962, particularly for abandoning the original style of Zaydi leadership and succession, thereby effectuating an "adulteration" and decline of Zaydism, see Haykel 1999: 194; Bruck 2010: 192.

- 30 Quietist Salafis distrust or entirely reject democratic forms and parliamentary policy and instead promote complete loyalty to a ruler, even when he is deemed corrupt or unjust, see Bonnefoy 2011: 88–97. In this regard, Salafi doctrine is fundamentally different from the quest for social justice led by many among the Muslim Brothers, jihadis, and also Zaydis.

counterclaims and blocked all efforts at an alliance. A photograph of that time shows a teenage boy with a stern face and ironically raised eyebrow wearing the uniform of a first lieutenant in the armed forces.

After his return, a deceptive calm prevailed in Sufyān. Yet beyond the surface of spurious peace, the tribe's collective wrath festered; it was directed against *bayt* al-Aḥmar, but also against the regime, for the Sufyān firmly believed that the regime had made common cause with al-Aḥmar and bore its share of responsibility for the deaths of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his sons, and were to blame for not prosecuting the killers. A few months later the tense situation veered into violence when the Sufyān seized on the first occasion they could to rise up in arms and drag the regime into a military confrontation. This conflict, referred to as the “war of Nūriyya” (*ḥarb Nūriyya*), marked the end of Šāliḥ's policy of rapprochement vis-à-vis Mujāhid. Its aftershocks disturbed their relation well beyond the YAR's end.

I took over the office of the shaykh at a young age, and since then I have been preoccupied with defensive wars and revenge issues. In the year after the meeting with Šāliḥ, a soldier kidnapped a girl from al-Ḥarf city. We seized upon this opportunity to wage a war on the regime. We blocked the road, besieged the garrison in the Qishla in al-Ḥarf and cut off its food and water supply. We killed twenty-five soldiers and officers and took fifteen captive. Only one of us was killed and one other injured. This war was called the war of Nūriyya, because Nūriyya was the name of the girl who had been abducted by the soldier in al-Ḥarf.

It was a large and violent confrontation. The regime was forced to dispatch two military brigades to al-Ḥarf, one brigade from ‘Amrān [city], and another from Ṣa‘da called *liwā’ al-‘urūba* under the command of Brigadier General ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dhahab from Ḥizyaz in Sanḥān. [This was] in addition to the battalion that was already stationed in Qishla in al-Ḥarf city. The soldier who kidnapped Nūriyya was from this battalion. He was from Hamdān Sanaa tribe.

Among the Sufyān, as always, a common threat effectively suspended the tribe's segmentary loyalties, it pushed the rivalries and jealousies of one segment against another into the background, and it forged the tribe into a cohesive unit: *al-ḥarb al-khārījīyya tajma’ al-kull* (“an external war unites everyone”). During the war, old contracts and agreements between Sufyān's moieties Ruhm and Šubāra came into effect; these aimed at mutual cooperation in upholding the inviolability of the tribe's territory – agreements that

historically never failed “to pull the sections of the tribe [of Sufyān] together, to make them one unit ‘like the upper arm and the lower arm.’”³¹

When the army failed to lift the siege on the Qishla in al-Ḥarf, the government shifted its focus to mediation. Ever a difficult terrain for outsiders, at that point in time Sufyān was a no-go zone for Ḥāshid shaykhs. Hence the government designated Aḥmad al-Ḍalʿaī as its negotiator, he combined the functions of a high-ranking representative of Sanaa governorate (*wakīl amānat Ṣanʿā*)³² and was a shaykh of ʿIyāl Surayḥ, a tribe of Bakīl. As a shaykh of Bakīl, Aḥmad al-Ḍalʿaī was able to cross the border into Sufyān unhindered and make his voice heard among the tribe.

The government sent the *wakīl* of Sanaa governorate to demand that we lift the siege on the Qishla and release the captured soldiers, but we refused. We demanded the release of Nūriyya and her kidnapper in order to punish him under tribal law. The government refused to hand him over to us, because it feared that soldiers would stop serving in the army if there were reason to expect their extradition [to tribal jurisdiction] in case of conflicts between the army and the tribes.

Mujāhid explained that under tribal law, the penalty for the kidnapper of Nūriyya would be as follows: If she was unmarried, he must marry her. If she was married, he must be put to death. When negotiations reached a deadlock, the regime resorted to a double ploy to outwit the tribe’s strength. Since Nūriyya was married, the government tracked down her husband and effectuated their prompt divorce, so that the soldier, in case he fell into the tribe’s hands, would get away with marrying the woman. The regime’s second manoeuvre revealed the value of Ṣāliḥ’s patronage networks; some minor shaykhs of Sufyān who were on the payroll of the government brought about the release of the fifteen captured soldiers.

When the negotiations [between the Sufyān and the regime] were still in progress, some lesser shaykhs of Sufyān went to where the captives

31 Dresch 1989: 128 and Dresch 2002: 79. Dresch’s observation refers to tribal contracts of cooperation and joint defence between Sufyān’s moieties (Ṣubāra and Ruhm) from the time of the 1960s civil war, when the Sufyān were politically divided into republicans and royalists and yet agreed to jointly defend their tribal territory against external aggression. Similar agreements were in effect among other tribes, see al-Ruwayshān (1997: 120–126) for Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl.

32 In administrative terms, a *wakīl* is a kind of secretary of state or sector director.

were detained and lied to the guards, telling them that we had reached an agreement with the *wakīl* to release the captives. The guards believed them and set the soldiers free. When news of this treachery came out, the tribe of Sufyān reacted with outrage. They rose and announced the annulment of the shaykhdom of those traitor shaykhs and elevated my shaykhdom above that of all other shaykhs of Sufyān.

The war ended when the Sufyān felt that they had sufficiently embarrassed the state.

When we felt that we had achieved what we desired in [terms of] damaging the reputation of the army and the state, we lifted the siege [of the Qishla in al-Ḥarf] and returned to our homes without having reached any understanding with the state.

The most important qualities of a shaykh in Yemen include his intimate knowledge of tribal affairs and customary law, as well as his superior skills in conflict mediation and verbal suasion.³³ If the situation arises, however, a shaykh must also be able to prove his assertiveness towards his opponents, and show his courage and leadership qualities in war.³⁴ Mujāhid's courage and, not least, the "disgraceful" blunders of the state strengthened his position when, during the war of Nūriyya, a second tribal gathering took place and the whole tribe of Sufyān confirmed his shaykhdom. The day after his father's death in 1987, his home segment Dhū Aḥmad had elected him as their new shaykh. Because Mujāhid had also "inherited" the position of the senior shaykh of Ruhm moiety, which is in constant competition with the senior shaykh of the Ṣubāra moiety over the rank of senior shaykh of the whole of Sufyān (*shaykh mashāyikh Sufyān*), his shaykhdom had to be confirmed "at the first opportunity" (*fī awwal furṣa*) by the whole tribe. To this end, representatives of all segments of Sufyān, from across the vast territory of the tribe, had to gather; this opportunity arose during the general tribal mobilizations during the war of Nūriyya.

33 Caton 1987 and Caton 1990.

34 In his case study of the career of a Murādī shaykh, Shryock (1990: 172) sees an element of shaykhly status in the shaykh's reputation as "a forceful man, widely feared, whose power engenders violence." The "tremendous" reputation of Mujāhid Abū Shawārib, too, rested in part on the fighting prowess he had shown during the 1960s civil war, see Dresch 1989: 101. There are, however, exceptions, as some shaykhs never participate in war, see Gingrich 1994: 26; and Brandt 2012.

The gathering took place west of al-Ḥarf, where the negotiations between Sufyān's tribal leaders and the *wakīl* had taken place. The "traitor shaykhs," who had fraudulently effected the release of the captured soldiers, were excluded from the election; their "faces were blackened" and their tribal honour sullied.³⁵ Mujaḥid's shaykhdom as shaykh of Dhū Aḥmad and senior shaykh of Sufyān's Ruḥm moiety was confirmed by the shaykhs and elders of the whole tribe in an election, and a second document was issued confirming his investiture. Again, the *dawshān* was sent to announce the result of the election.

The *dawshān* who publicly announced the confirmation of my shaykhdom by the whole of Sufyān was [again] Muḥammad Nūbī. It happened that the *dawshān* proclaimed my shaykhdom at the time of nightfall. 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was furious about these events and the outcome of the election. We were told that he said, "This is a *maghrib* declaration and at *maghrib* the devils are present."³⁶

The war of Nūriyya was part of a broader development that was not limited to Sufyān. During the second half of the 1980s, a number of conflicts between the tribes and the government flared up in northern and north-eastern Yemen. Sinān Abū Laḥūm's diary entries provide ample evidence that Banī Ḥushaysh, Murhiba, and Banī Ḥārith were also plagued by unrest.³⁷ In 1986, a conflict broke out between the Qayfa and 'Awaḍ tribes near al-Bayḍā'; this spread into the adjacent areas and prompted the intervention of the army.³⁸ In 1988, Arḥab gravitated outside state control.³⁹ In 1989, at almost the same time as the war of Nūriyya, a confrontation between the tribes and the regime erupted in the Ma'rib area; this conflict went down in history as the "Ma'rib revolution" (*thawrat Ma'rib*). The Ma'rib revolution spread from Nihm into 'Abīda and from there into Khawlān, Arḥab, Jad'ān, Murād, and al-Jawf, and temporarily rendered the area "a war zone."⁴⁰ In his memoirs Abū Laḥūm notes that Ṣāliḥ,

35 On the notions of "black" and "white" in Yemen's tribal concepts of honour and disgrace, see Dresch 1987a and chapter 1.

36 *Maghrib* is the time of the Muslim evening prayer that begins after sunset.

37 Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 3: 342–344 and passim.

38 Dresch 2000: 180.

39 Dunbar 1992: 468 n. 28.

40 Dresch 1995: 43. On the conflicts between the tribes and the government in the second half of the 1980s, see 'Abd al-Salām 1988: 91; al-'Abbāsi 1990: 134–141; Dunbar 1992: 467–468; Dresch 1995: 43–44; Dresch 2000: 180–181; Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 3: 342–344. On Ma'rib, see also Blumi 2018: 149–154.

Similar to the war of Nūriyya, the Ma'rib revolution was also initially triggered by the violence of the army against a woman, see Dresch 1995: 43. Women have a special iconic

when his relations with a number of tribes went through a period of weakness and (semi-)rupture, vaguely enquired about ways to restore stability (*istiqrār*) in the face of increasing tribal unrest. To this end, Abū Laḥūm brought forward proposals, which, however, “did not please” the president (*lam tu‘ajab-hu*).⁴¹

In Sufyān, in particular, Ṣāliḥ’s plans came to nought. In dealing with Mujaḥid Ḥaydar, Ṣāliḥ’s most artful manoeuvres only engendered backlashes. His efforts at integrating Mujaḥid into his finely crafted patronage networks and using him as a secret weapon against ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar only served to intensify Mujaḥid’s ire and his deep-seated antipathy for the regime. Worse still, Sufyān had risen against the regime and dragged the army into an open confrontation. Supported by a wave of indignation against the blunders of the army during the war of Nūriyya, Mujaḥid’s tribal position and recognition were stronger than before.

Bayt al-Aḥmar also watched the rise of Aḥmad Ḥaydar’s heir with concern. This proud family did not wish to suffer the provocations of an adolescent. In the 1980s, *bayt* Ḥaydar had been extinguished almost root and branch, and the graves of Aḥmad Ḥaydar and his three sons in the cemetery of Jassār stood as mute testimony to the fate that awaited those who chose to scorn the YAR’s new balance of power. When Mujaḥid Ḥaydar emerged and grew truculent, something had to be done. And if the issue could not be solved by a trial of arms in battle, it would be dealt with by other means. Mujaḥid recalled an incident that took place shortly after the war of Nūriyya.

One night, I was surprised by one of my tribesmen knocking at the door. When I opened it, he produced a mine and six hundred thousand riyals. I asked him what it was. He answered, “This is what some men of al-‘Uṣaymāt gave me to put under your car and blow you up.” I thanked him, and told him that the money was his reward, but I took the mine. After this, Ṣāliḥ knew that I held no goodwill for him and he stopped paying the salaries of my guards. Ever since, he was odious to me and I to him.

status in the tribal societies of Yemen, and any insult to them seriously threatens a man’s honour, see Adra 1982: 187; Dresch 1989: 54–57; Weir 2007: 50–51, 206. Weir (2007: 50) observed that “men’s honour is most profoundly compromised ... if they fail to prevent their women from ... being verbally or physically abused by other men.” In the history of Sufyān further cases can be found in which violence against women triggered the eruption of large tribal confrontations, see Glaser 1884: 170 and Brandt 2016: 135. In addition, in the late 1970s a protracted conflict in Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl erupted as a conflict over women, see Caton 1990 and Caton 2005.

41 Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 3: 343. Regrettably, Abū Laḥūm is silent on the nature of his proposals.

The grievances rooted in the late 1980s left a kind of *damnosa hereditas* – an accursed inheritance, a toxic legacy – for the nascent Republic of Yemen. After 1990, the unification of the two Yemens and the formation of a multiparty system opened an entire new field of competition and passionate struggles – the arena of party politics, the adventure of democracy – that became more acrimonious in the soil of Sufyān than anywhere else in northern highland Yemen.

The Road to Politics (1990–1993)

ثعبان يلف على ثعبان

[We were like] a serpent entwined around another serpent



May 22, 1990 was a watershed moment in the history of Yemen. The solemn signing ceremony of the Unity Agreement (Sanaa Accord of 1990) in Crater, Aden, was a moment of deep emotions; Sinān Abū Laḥūm recalled in his memoirs that many of those in attendance were moved to tears.¹ In 1989, after twenty years of on-and-off negotiations between the Yemeni sister states, unification finally gained momentum when the Eastern bloc began to dissolve and Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* reduced Soviet influence in South Arabia.² With the unification of the two Yemens and the formation of a multiparty parliamentary system, the united nation and the democratic idea seemed beyond question. Beyond all opposing interests and criss-crossing enmities, at this sublime moment in Crater the ideal of the democratic nation emerged as the new, unifying principle of the era, one that could rise above the tribulations of the time.

In fact, however, unification was dictated by the political weakness and economic bankruptcy of the PDRY regime. The YSP had virtually decapitated

- 1 See Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 36. There is no historical precedent for Yemeni unity. For the past three millennia, Yemen only briefly saw larger political structures under indigenous rule; at the time of the Ḥimyarīs (110 BCE–525 CE) and a millennium later, under the Qāsimi imams who, after the end of the first Ottoman occupation in 1635, briefly extended their rule over large parts of northern and southern Yemen including Wādī Ḥaḍramawt.
- 2 Abū Laḥūm (2004: vol. 3: 355) notes in his diary that Aden had concerns about how Moscow would react to the unification of PDRY and YAR, but that the German example brought about a breakthrough for Yemen. Al-Jifri (1997b: 179) mentions that over the ten-year period from 1972 to 1981 alone, a committee concerned with the unification issue spent 14,000 hours discussing the prospects of unification. The number remains impossible to verify, but shows the enormous complexity of the unification issue.

itself in the 1986 intraparty leadership struggle that led to Secretary-General ‘Alī Nāṣir Muḥammad’s flight to the north. The abrupt withdrawal of Soviet support and the dissolution of the socialist camp in the wake of *perestroika* forced the weakened PDRY into this “wedding of a socialist society with a traditional, tribal-dominated one.”³ Neither side had ever dealt with elections or democratic politics. The two former authoritarian power centres went into the merger without good faith in each other. Laws and regulations were and remained divided, and the governments in Sanaa and Aden continued to operate separately, with their own ministries, security forces, and currencies. “The only thing united,” southern politician al-Jifri trenchantly remarked, “was the name of the republic, the national flag, and the national anthem.”⁴ The North and South did not merge into any kind of organized or cohesive group, but rather resembled Gellner’s “mechanical cohesion” based on a coalition of distinct groups, bound by shared political interests, lacking trust in each other.⁵ Yet for one sublime moment in Crater, the nation was united in jubilation and rejoiced over the reconciled fatherland.

The former North brought 11 million inhabitants into unified Yemen, the South brought 2.5 million. Notwithstanding the demographic imbalance, the unification accords of 1990 divided most governmental posts equally. ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ became president and head of state, and ‘Alī Sālim al-Bīḍ became vice president. A unity constitution was agreed upon in May 1990 and ratified one year later. Political pluralism and elections were part of the unity deal, and the erstwhile governments remained in place as political parties. In the North, power remained concentrated in the hands of the GPC, the umbrella political organization headed by Ṣāliḥ since its creation in 1982. As the “tissue of the Northern state,”⁶ in YAR times the GPC had included representatives of most political groupings from across the political spectrum and provided an alternative framework to political plurality, which had been prohibited by the constitution of the YAR.⁷ Likewise, the dominant political force in the southern part of united Yemen remained the YSP, the Soviet-style Marxist-Leninist vanguard party created in 1978 that had ruled the PDRY without legal opposition, and that entered the new multiparty environment in 1990 as a political party

3 This expression was taken from al-Suwaidi (1995: 13). On the differences between the two merging states, see also Brehony 2011: 183–198.

4 Al-Jifri 1997a: 44.

5 Gellner 1987: 24–26.

6 Dresch 2000: 189.

7 For the GPC, see also Burrowes 1987: 124–125; Phillips 2008: 50–55; Phillips 2011a: 116–118; and Day 2012: 103–104.

under al-Biḍ's leadership.⁸ Until the legislative elections (originally scheduled for autumn 1992) that were meant to mark the end of the transition process, the two parties formed an equitable coalition that was soon subjected to a profound stress test.

It was the emergence of a new party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (al-Tajammu' al-Yamanī li-l-Iṣlāḥ), commonly known as the Iṣlāḥ party, that precipitated the open conflict between the coalition partners, the GPC and the YSP. Iṣlāḥ's origins were in the Sunni-Islamist "Islamic Front" created by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and employed by Ṣāliḥ from 1979 onwards in his battles against his challengers and foes. After its transformation into a political party in 1990, Iṣlāḥ combined a number of Sunni Islamist schools of thought and comprised an uneasy ideological and political alliance that integrated and represented the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, tribal leaders, and businessmen.⁹ Most Iṣlāḥ representatives were former members of the GPC. The Iṣlāḥ party had been created to counterbalance the YSP and give political voice to the GPC's more religiously inclined wing, notably those around 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who became the head of the Iṣlāḥ party and leader of its "tribal wing" and who used Iṣlāḥ to make political progress in his complex relationship with Ṣāliḥ.¹⁰ Along with 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, Ṣāliḥ's close relative General 'Alī Muḥsin played a leading role in the creation of the Iṣlāḥ party.¹¹ The cleric 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī led the party's hard-line conservative wing that had links to militant Islamist groups.¹²

On the other side of the political spectrum, the formation of the Sunni-dominated Iṣlāḥ party triggered the establishment of a Zaydi-oriented party, the Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq or al-Ḥaqq party, that represented the interests of Zaydis and the sayyids (pl. *sāda*) and tried to reconcile Zaydi thought with republicanism and democratic principles.¹³ Al-Ḥaqq remained a rather insignificant party

8 For the YSP, see Halliday 1990: 29–33; Dresch 2000: 168–172; and Brehony 2011.

9 On the Iṣlāḥ party, see Carapico 1993a; Koszinowski 1993; Dresch and Haykel 1995; Stiftl 1998; Schwedler 1998; Schwedler 2006; Bonnefoy and Ibn Cheikh 2001; Glosemeyer 2001: 87–88; Phillips 2008: 137–166; Alviso-Marino 2010; Bonnefoy and Poirier 2010; Yadav 2013; Yadav 2014; and Lackner 2023: 42–46.

10 Koszinowski 1993; Khayrullah 2016: 52–53. Bruck (1998: 183–185) and Schwedler (2006: 71) rightly note that al-Aḥmar was perceived as embodying a number of political and sectarian identities.

11 For 'Alī Muḥsin's position and role in the Ṣāliḥ government, see Phillips 2011a: 90–100.

12 On al-Zindānī, see Dresch and Haykel 1995: 410–412. The US government claimed that al-Zindānī funded terrorist networks affiliated with Osama bin Laden, with whom he fought in Afghanistan, see Phillips 2008: 138.

13 On Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq, see Dresch and Haykel 1995; Haykel 1999: 198–201; Haykel 2003: 226–228; Bruck 1998: 171–172; and Bruck 2010: 200–204.

and only rose to importance in the early 2000s, with the emergence of the Ḥūthīs. In overall terms, the post-unification environment led to the formation of approximately 45 parties, including several pan-Arab parties such as the Baath and Nasserites. The programmes and affiliations of the smaller parties were often poorly defined; many of them were, in one way or another, offshoots and proxies of the large parties; the apparent bickering between them were only feints to deceive fools.

With political liberalization and the formation of the Iṣlāḥ party, the relationship between Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar became more complex. Ṣāliḥ had a vital interest in the formation of Iṣlāḥ. By founding an Islamist party through “confidants” like ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and General ‘Alī Muḥsin, he expected to gain political access to the Islamist parts of the population.¹⁴ For many years, Islamist militias had been a military instrument to combat the influence of the Aden-sponsored NDF in the north; in the unity environment, the Iṣlāḥ party was intended to be a political counterweight to the YSP. At the same time, however, Iṣlāḥ was an opposition party that maintained relations with the Saudis, who were increasingly hostile towards the growing power of a unified Yemen (and thus towards Ṣāliḥ), and who supported the process of estrangement between North and South. After Yemen’s UN vote in the 1990 Gulf crisis, and the dispute over the renewal of the Treaty of Ṭā’if in 1992, the Saudi rulers’ irritation about Ṣāliḥ became closer to aversion.¹⁵

‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, along with Saudi Arabia, had long been opposed to the idea of unity with the secular, “communist” PDRY, but, in contrast to the unification efforts of the 1970s, he proved unable to prevent it.¹⁶ The YSP and its policies that were slanted towards weakening the tribes and tribalism provided al-Aḥmar with compelling images of horror, and his stance against socialism became one of the main themes of his political programme. Tribalism and Islamism on the one hand, and socialism on the other, were irreconcilable, he declared, and the chasm between them could never be bridged. Many times he had conjured up the notion of the “atheist-communist-opportunist-anarchist thinking” (*fikr ilḥādī shaywa’i intihāzī fawḍawī*) of the socialists in Aden.¹⁷

14 See Khayrullah 2016: 86.

15 See Dunbar 1992: 470–471 on the Saudi position. In 1992, shortly before the renewal of the Treaty of Ṭā’if again became necessary, Saudi-Yemeni relations reached a new low and the Yemeni government threatened to withdraw from the treaty; this led to Saudi military manoeuvres near Ḥaraḍ in the Tihāma lowlands.

16 ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was one of the principal reasons unification efforts failed in the early 1970s, see Dunbar 1992: 468.

17 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 242.

Because of the dispute over the Islamic character of paragraph 3 of the unity constitution, al-Aḥmar stayed away from the signing ceremony of the Unity Agreement in Crater, and the unresolved disagreement between the Islamists and the ruling coalition over the constitution continued to smoulder.¹⁸ Unlike the ideologically indifferent and much more pragmatic Ṣāliḥ, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was committed to his ideological convictions and opposed to any political deals with the South, especially if they served to benefit Ṣāliḥ.

During the short period between unity in 1990 and civil war in 1994, Yemen lurched from crisis to crisis. It faced the foreign and domestic policy dispute over Yemen’s stance during the Gulf Crisis, Yemen’s diplomatic isolation and the associated deterioration of the domestic economic situation, the postponement of the elections beyond the November 1992 deadline, the struggle over paragraph 3 of the constitution, widespread corruption, the personal conflicts between politicians, the intimidation and series of assassinations of YSP leaders, al-Bīdī’s absences from Sanaa and his politics of boycott; ultimately, the acrimony caused by the rift between Sanaa and Aden began to poison the political climate. Finally, the intense struggle raging around the merger of the armed forces brought about a crisis that gripped the republic.¹⁹ ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar has been quoted as saying (in late 1990) that any “talk about stability and development is just a cheat ... oppression is widespread and the government is totally absent.” Thus he gave voice to the sentiments of dissatisfaction prevailing among many political stakeholders at that time.²⁰

The unclear relationship between al-Aḥmar and Ṣāliḥ in the increasingly complex and antagonistic environment with many unpredictable variables may have been the reason why al-Aḥmar assumed a cautious conciliatory role towards Mujāhid Ḥaydar, and in summer 1992 even attempted (albeit in a superficial and ultimately unsuccessful way) to resolve the deadly conflict between them through secret mediation. In the setting of the early 1990s, the conflict between Mujāhid and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar faded slightly into the background, while the conflict between Mujāhid and President Ṣāliḥ prominently

18 After Yemeni unity in 1990, al-Aḥmar’s resistance focused on the dispute over paragraph 3 of the unity constitution that determined whether *shar‘a* law should be the sole source or the principal source of law in unified Yemen, see Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 28–29, 32–33. As a result of an agreement by the GPC and YSP on the basic structures of national unity, a referendum on the constitution was held on 16 May 1991. The referendum was boycotted by the Iṣlāḥ party, see Kostiner 1996: 30; Dunbar 1992: 473.

19 The fourth part of Sinān Abū Laḥūm’s memoirs (2004), based on his diaries, meticulously describes the process of disruption and alienation between northern and southern elites after unity in 1990. On this process, see also Kostiner 1996; and Nāṣir 2015.

20 Cited in al-Jifri 1997a: 47.

came to the fore: when Mujāhid managed to rid himself of the shackles of tribal vengeance and feuding that had bogged him down in Sufyān, and rose into the domain of politics, it was Ṣāliḥ who became his principal enemy.

In evaluating this period from 1990 to 1993, we must also consider the political mood among many of the highland tribes in the early 1990s. At that time, the grassroots activism and general spirit of rectification prevailing among the tribes was a factor that made possible Mujāhid's register shift from the tribal to the political. Large parts of tribal highland Yemen were averse to returning to the torpid political climate of the late YAR and enthusiastically welcomed what Carapico called an unprecedented "experiment in pluralism."²¹ Disaffected tribes that had lived in a state of limbo for at least two decades, abruptly and surprisingly found themselves caught up in epochal events that aroused in them political passion and hope (and, later, despair). After the victory over the NDF in 1981, critical voices among them were co-opted or silenced by the regime in Sanaa, and unification and political liberalization spurred new efforts towards activism, since there was now some justified hope for improvement.

Strictly speaking, Mujāhid's point of departure from tribal to national politics came with the ambush of Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar in the fall of 1990 and General 'Alī Muḥsin's subsequent punitive campaign that prompted Mujāhid to join the grassroots tribal movement that then became his springboard into the political realm. It is difficult to judge whether his sudden register shift from tribal to political was a product of deliberation or a result of chance. In timing, it coincided with the Talāḥum project, a series of tribal gatherings devoted to conflict resolution and reappraisal of the relation between the tribes and the state. Mujāhid's affiliation to the Talāḥum project signified a certain turning point in his career; from Sufyān's dusty desolation he mustered all his energy to propel his struggle against the northern regime into the limelight of national politics. With his typical energetic activism, he worked to make a name for himself through political campaigning, purposeful provocation, and by allying himself with al-Biḍ, the archenemy of Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar in Aden, all in the hope that this would publicize his cause.

Given the Ḥaydar family's long-standing connections with Aden and the NDF, Mujāhid's alliance with al-Biḍ was based on sound reasoning. The renewed entente sprang from their common enmity toward Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar, and their desire to confront the regime in Sanaa in the political setting of a united Yemen. Material interests also played a role, for Mujāhid's financial

21 Carapico 1996: 289.

resources were exhausted and he was in desperate need of a powerful and solvent sponsor who could help him implement his political project. A psychological factor certainly played into this alliance. Since his investiture as shaykh, Mujāhid was acting as the head of a notorious tribe, and his offensive actions against representatives of the Sanaa regime had earned him a dubious reputation. In this light we can better understand the meaning of his alignment with al-Bīḍ. It freed him from the reputation of being a troublesome leader and a highwayman. By aligning himself with a circle of well-known and respectable politicians, he could make their good reputation his own.

Again, with a political alliance between Mujāhid and al-Bīḍ against Ṣāliḥ, a triangular constellation emerged, which seemed, as so many of Yemen's transient political coalitions, to be informed by the spirit of the proverb "The enemy of my enemy is a friend" (*'aduw 'aduwi šadiq*). Yet this triangulation, which began so promisingly for Mujāhid, had repercussions that were as unpleasant as they were dangerous. From Ṣāliḥ's point of view, Mujāhid overstepped several marks when he teamed up with al-Bīḍ. He broke into Ṣāliḥ's very realm – the realm of politics – and, further, he allied himself with Ṣāliḥ's strongest rival. As a result, Mujāhid became a pawn in the tremendous tug of war between North and South set in motion by unification. Relying on al-Bīḍ was, perhaps, the cardinal mistake the shrewd and usually so distrustful Mujāhid made when he entwined his fate with a power that was already declining from the zenith of its influence, as al-Bīḍ ultimately proved an utterly unreliable ally. When Mujāhid put himself at the head of the Aden-sponsored resistance in tribal highland Yemen, he became the figurehead of a cause that was already doomed to fail. After the Saba' Conference in 1992 and the subsequent attempt on his life, he had to acknowledge that his cause was lost and that Ṣāliḥ was gaining ground and may soon predominate. Ultimately, Mujāhid, too deeply involved in the conflict with Sanaa, proved unable to act like his tribal peers, who had likewise recognized the hopelessness of the situation and prepared to rush to the side that would likely emerge victorious, as this would be most profitable to their ambitions: Ṣāliḥ's side.

1 Concerning Exhausted Resources

One of the hopes aroused by Yemeni unity, but bound to fail, was the assumption that the economic situation in a united Yemen would improve, especially with the start of oil production in the former border regions and the anticipated increase in foreign development and budgetary aid that this unique democratic experiment in Yemen could attract. These hopes were soon

shattered when the young republic was confronted by new and unanticipated burdens. In the Gulf Crisis of 1990, the Yemeni refusal to endorse the decision of the US-and Saudi-led coalition to forcibly expel Iraq from Kuwait prompted the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf monarchies to almost entirely cut their development aid, budgetary, and balance-of-payments support to Yemen. The misery of the Yemeni people was further aggravated by the even more considerable loss of remittances of several hundred thousand Yemeni migrant workers whom the Saudis forced to return to Yemen, where they were likely to face unemployment. The result was a severe economic crisis and a deep recession, in which the leadership of a united Yemen was forced to shift the focus of national policy – in the words of Kostiner – “from the anticipation of prosperity to a rescue operation aimed at stabilizing the situation.”²²

In the northern highlands, the devastating effects of the deteriorating socio-economic setting were felt almost immediately; these led to an increase in previously rare phenomena, such as theft, raids and robberies, banditry, and gangsterism. The kidnapping of foreigners and theft of their vehicles became epidemic. With rising crime rates, violence and feuds were carried into the cities, adding to the wave of political assassinations that peaked around 1992 and 1993.²³ Adding to the high unemployment and intermittent price riots, it was clear that a certain social volatility was building. In the moral space of the highland tribes and its spectrum ranging from white to black, these transgressions, especially those that concerned the “redistribution” of property, oscillated in a grey area; often they were understood as an answer to the fraud, corruption, and dishonesty of the political elite. Many of the violations that took place in the early 1990s remotely resonated with Hobsbawm’s conceptions of brigandage, which express social protest by peasants, as well as those of some ‘Abbāsīd bandits, who expressed their disgust for the prevailing situation of *fasād al-zamān* (“the corruption of the age”).²⁴

22 Kostiner 1996: 33. On the economic problems of the early 1990s, see Kostiner 1996: 31–34, 36–39; Detalle 1997: 35–43; Nonneman 1997; and Brehony 2011: 185–187.

23 Dresch 1993: 73–74; Dresch 1995: 35 n. 6; Dresch 2000: 191; and Nāṣir 2015: 75–94.

24 Hobsbawm (1969) argues that banditry is a form of protest against the exploitation of the peasantry. His understanding of social banditry is at times not far from a “romanticised” popular perception of the noble righteous robber. Contrary to Hobsbawm’s interpretation, Cooperson (2015: 199) sees the bandits of the ‘Abbāsīd period – or their literary figures – neither as popular heroes nor defenders of the peasantry. This “Robin Hood-esque” vision appears in many written cultures. The body of literature on it is almost countless. Modern actors who appeal to these myths are often serving self-interests and rarely withstand critical scrutiny.

Sufyān had been a disadvantaged and poverty-stricken area even before the economic crisis of the early 1990s. Its administrative centre, al-Ḥarf, was scarcely more than a huddle of hovels and makeshift market stalls along the highway. Sufyān's small villages and settlements mainly consisted of ancient buildings clustered on windswept rocks, or hidden in the hollows of the valleys. The houses of Sufyān's senior shaykhs seemed austere and gloomy compared with the palatial estates of the Ḥāshid shaykhs in Sanaa. The buildings of Sufyān's senior shaykhs were often considerably old and resembled strongholds; they showed none of the ornate neo-traditional brilliance of the fancy shaykhly mansions in Sanaa's posh neighbourhoods. Resembling massive adobe or stone watchtowers equipped with shooting loopholes, they were used for refuge and defence, and not constructed for finer aspects of décor, representation, and entertainment. While elsewhere in Yemen the advent of development, investment, and the market economy introduced banks and market transactions, in Sufyān wealth was still largely calculated in the old ways, by estate and the number of livestock a person owned. Herding, *qāt* farming, hunting, smuggling, and small private businesses were the occupations of most peoples in Sufyān at that time.

In this respect, Mujāhid's situation differed little from the other men of his tribe. Although he was the scion of an ancient lineage, the senior shaykh of Sufyān's Ruhm moiety, pretender to the title of the senior shaykh of Sufyān, and lord of the al-Mudarrij crossing, he lacked a shaykh's most important source of income, namely, patronage. He lacked the support, encouragement, privilege, and financial aid bestowed by rulers, governments, or political parties on tribal leaders in exchange for their cooperation. A few years after his father's death, his opposition to President Ṣāliḥ had driven him to economic hardship.

During these years, I was often in want and embarrassed. What exhausted me most was the scant means at my disposal in the confrontations and wars. Because it is shameful among us to be poor, and this was always a very major concern for me, the question was, how can I perform all my duties without [my destitution] being revealed?²⁵ The warrior shaykh (*al-shaykh al-muḥārib*) has no salary from the state. And the tribe does not pay a salary to the shaykh. On the contrary, the position of the shaykh implies generosity and hospitality and expenditure without thrift, and

25 See also Dostal 1985: 347–348. Based on his observations among the Banī Ḥushaysh, Dostal argues that although there is a principle of equality in tribal societies, poor members of the tribe experience discrimination because being poor is considered “shameful” and causes social antagonism.

he normally pays for some of his tribesmen's problems out of his own pocket. The shaykh's money comes from partnerships in private business and agriculture, particularly the cultivation of *qāt*. But the most important source of income of a shaykh remains political work, if he finds a political sponsor who cooperates with him.

In our meeting in 1988, Ṣāliḥ had given me a military rank and a water project for my village and monthly payments that enabled me to recruit twenty armed men of my tribe as bodyguards for my protection. But after the war of Nūriyya [in 1989], when he saw that I did not like him and would not accept to be dependent [on him], he suspended the payment of my bodyguards. The water project, however, was implemented before the disagreement between us arose. I had donated the water project to the fiercest segment (*ashras fakhd*) of the tribe of Sufyān in order to secure their support. I left my own village without water, in order to earn the loyalty of this very segment.

This "fiercest segment" benefiting from Ṣāliḥ's water project were the Dhū Ra'dān who had filled the void left behind by the Dhū 'Aybān* (Aḥmad Ḥaydar's former bodyguards). In the course of the protracted blood feud in the 1980s, the latter had sided with *bayt* al-Aḥmar and eventually been expelled from Sufyān as a result. The Dhū Ra'dān were fiercely loyal to *bayt* Ḥaydar; they were seasoned and intrepid warriors resolutely determined to support and protect Mujāhid Ḥaydar in the tribal feuds and the campaigns against *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the regime. The gift of the water project to the Dhū Ra'dān underlined the importance of these men's loyalty to Mujāhid, for they knew very well how to handle a weapon, how to guard, how to patrol and protect.

The fact that he lacked an attachment to a power centre had dire consequences for a "warrior shaykh" like Mujāhid. These consequences were as unpleasant as they were dangerous, for patronage payments usually included posts for the payment of the bodyguards of a shaykh.²⁶ The shaykhs on Ṣāliḥ's payroll had the financial means to procure extensive security and protection, while those opposed to the regime had to seek other ways to secure their protection, through members of their tribes, whom they could only remunerate insufficiently or not at all. Mujāhid grew up in an environment of constant threats; the experience of danger has stayed with him and certainly shaped

26 The presence of an armed escort not only serves to protect a shaykh, but is also indispensable for him to perform his mediation and arbitration duties, see Gingrich 2011: 42–43.

who he is. Since the war of Nūriyya in 1989 and the subsequent attempt on his life, he knew the danger he was in.

I am a warrior, I do not receive emoluments, neither from Sanaa nor from Riyadh, as the other shaykhs do. This rebellion exhausted me because I was confronted with the power of the Ṣāliḥ system and the immense means of *bayt al-Aḥmar*. By killing and persecuting us, they forced us to protect and defend ourselves. In the time of my father, our bodyguards came from the Dhū ‘Aybān* segment. And after the problem [with the Dhū ‘Aybān*], our guards came from all segments of the tribe [who served] on a rotational basis. Every segment of the tribe provided one, two, or three people, according to my request, for a period of one [lunar] month. After this, they passed over their task to other members of the segment.

In order to win their approval and support, I solved their problems without taking money, and fought with them in their legitimate struggles. This was mutual support. It was a matter of brothers of flesh, blood, and sweat, struggling together in their rightful struggles. People showed me their gratitude and sided with me, and those of them who had money did their duty to cover the expenses of some items. And, thank God, I fulfilled my duties without bowing to anyone except God, and I did not sell any of our estates because the sale of an estate is considered shameful among us.

A shaykh with few financial resources like Mujāhid Ḥaydar had to convince his followers every day of the need to provide services such as protection and the provision of bodyguards. This required dedication and continual work and commitment for the benefit of the tribe. This symbiotic relationship between a shaykh and his tribe resembles the Maussian notion of the gift economy, in which services are exchanged without direct monetary compensation.²⁷ This exchange of services, embedded in the tribal value and solidarity system, not only provided the protection and support Mujāhid required, but it also reinforced his belonging to and backing by the tribe. The patronage system, by contrast, engendered a system of protection between tribesmen and their shaykh that was based on an exchange of loyal services for payment and favours. This form of protection, based on a combination of basic principles of market economy with some form of tribal law and norms, was employed by

27 Mauss 1990.

many of the major shaykhs patronized by the government, shaykhs who were increasingly aloof and distanced from the daily concerns of their tribes. This system increased status differences and the often lamented process of distance (*tabaʿud*) between shaykhs and their tribe – or, between *maḥsubiyya* (a set of patronage relations) and *qabaliyya* (tribalism).²⁸

In fact, however, Mujāhid was not that destitute – at least theoretically. Historically *bayt* Ḥaydar had also entered into alliances with powerful and solvent sponsors. During the 1960s civil war, Aḥmad Ḥaydar had fought on the side of the royalists (the republican tribes were led by ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar) and, as always in times of war, the strategic location of Sufyān at the gateway between the power centres of Sanaa and Ṣaʿda lent particular importance to his role.²⁹ In compensation for the manner in which Aḥmad Ḥaydar had supported the efforts of the last Imam, Saudi Arabia and the royal princes had generously rewarded his endeavours.

My father was a rich person, he had a large amount of money, Yemeni and Saudi money, dollars and Maria Theresa silver thalers [Austrian coins], and above all, thousands of gold guineas. My father had been a royalist in the civil war after the 1962 revolution, and he got it from the royal princes of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn. He was the commander of the Sufyān axis (*muḥaww Sufyān*), and throughout the civil war the royalist front in Sufyān did not fall. The war consumed a lot of money, but there remained a treasure of 5,000 gold guineas that was never spent.

Yet after my father's demise, and in spite of the most exhaustive search, I did not find the fortune he left behind. God knows where it has gone. My father was killed when I was young; I was too young for the arcane talks about secrets and where he hid his treasures. We expected that my mother would know, but were surprised to find that she, too, knew nothing. Until now, we do not know where he hid it. We are still searching for his treasure. My father must have told someone. The treasure is buried, this much is certain, but we do not know its whereabouts. We asked all his friends, but they told us that they know nothing, and over the years, we never observed any signs of affluence among them. However, as our proverb goes, "the good [money] does not get lost" (*al-ḥalāl lā yafūt*). God willing, one day we will recover it.

28 Dresch 1995: 38. For further details of this discussion, see chapter 1.

29 See chapter 1.

In times when he was not preoccupied with feuding and campaigning against the regime, Mujāhid spent long periods looking for his father's legendary gold treasure. He meticulously examined the family's estate and places frequented by his father, but to no avail. The inheritance remained unretrieved like the treasures of the Arabian Nights, which slept in the bosom of the earth, under the eyes of the *jinnī*.

Again, the profound difference between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar becomes obvious, in particular between Mujāhid and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's son Ḥamīd, who was only a few years older than Mujāhid and belonged to the same generational cohort – the generation of the *shubul*.³⁰ While Mujāhid was increasingly desperate searching the dusty soil of Sufyān for the gold guineas of his father, Ḥamīd assumed an air of unmistakable superiority. Besides being the chairman of the Ahmar Group Holding conglomerate, he owned a true business empire, which consisted of the telecom company Sabafon, the Saba Islamic Bank, a string of Western fast-food restaurants, and various import-export companies. In addition, he partnered with Siemens in the power sector, and acted as agent for the London-based Arcadia Petroleum, a commodity trading company that regularly bought most of Yemen's monthly crude oil output. Last but not least, Ḥamīd received, like his sire, generous cash payoffs from the Saudis.³¹ Ḥamīd was on the rise to become Yemen's most prominent business tycoon and self-made billionaire, Yemen's Midas who seemed to possess the ability to turn everything he touched into gold. By contrast, Mujāhid seemed to be living as a vestige of ancient South Arabia: in his endeavours to recover the buried riches of his father, he revealed himself as a kindred soul to the passionate treasure seekers in al-Hamdānī's *al-Iklīl*.³²

Yet, alas, the treasure remained hidden. When Mujāhid found that he was likely to be truly in need and deeply embarrassed, he established a simple trading business in Sufyān and on terms suited to his scant means, he allocated people from his tribe to smuggle *qāt* into Saudi Arabia.³³ This turned out to be

30 The *shubul* are the sons of those shaykhs who had prominent roles in the 1960s civil war. Their fathers were the "warrior shaykhs" (*al-shuyūkh al-manādīla*) or "lions," who acquired their credentials in the 1962 revolution and the subsequent civil war on either royalist or republican side. The sons were called the "lions' cubs" (*shubul*) because they had yet to prove their worth.

31 See Wikileaks, 31 August 2009. On his various sources of income, see also Longley 2008: 191–205; Blumi 2018: 172–173.

32 It was customary for the kings of ancient South Arabia to be entombed with their abundant riches, see al-Hamdānī (1940: vol. 8) on the historical monuments of South Arabia.

33 Cross-border smuggling activities were common among the Yemeni highland tribes, see Lichtenthäler 2003: 87–89.

a lucrative trade, and it continued until the civil war of 1994. But this revenue could not take him far and he continued to live in a state of constant peril. The war of Nūriyya in 1989, and ‘Alī Muḥsin’s punitive campaign against the Sufyān after the ambush of Šādiq al-Aḥmar in 1991 made it abundantly plain to him that he, too, was in need of an affluent sponsor, a powerful ally, who would support him to withstand and confront his enemies.

2 The Mousetrap (1991)

The interests and political agenda of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons regarding the establishment of the Iṣlāḥ party required continuous representation, cultivating personal contacts, and intensive networking, particularly in the Zaydi-influenced highlands north of Sanaa, where the Iṣlāḥ competed with the GPC-patronized shaykhs and the local luminaries of al-Ḥaqq, and where the YSP also knew how to exploit grievances that had grown over decades. The establishment and maintenance of the Iṣlāḥ party infrastructure, as well as the precepts of representation, at certain times required the personal presence of high-ranking Iṣlāḥ representatives in Ṣa‘da, and the only viable way from the capital to the northernmost province was the arterial highway connecting (via Sufyān) Sanaa with Ṣa‘da city. Yet in Sufyān, the gap of al-Mudarrij continued to operate like a mousetrap, and Mujaḥid Ḥaydar remained vigilant. The bottleneck of al-Mudarrij was a perpetual menace, and any rash move by a member of *bayt* al-Aḥmar on this section of highway created a magnificent opportunity for Mujaḥid to rekindle new bouts of violence related to the feud between them. Undertaking the long detour through the Tihāma lowlands to avoid this section of al-Mudarrij was undoubtedly an embarrassment to *bayt* al-Aḥmar and their tribal standing and prestige. It was only a matter of time before there would be another confrontation, and in autumn 1991, one year after unity, the next feud-related incident between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar arose.³⁴

We primarily targeted ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons but we were unable to reach them in their home area because of their capacity to recruit large armed escorts and [because] the regime was on their side, and

34 Mujaḥid Ḥaydar’s ambush on Šādiq al-Aḥmar is also briefly mentioned by Kostiner (1996: 40).

because our scant material and financial resources did not allow us to pursue them everywhere.

In Sufyān, I had placed sentinels who kept watch over the road day and night. One night, on a very early Friday morning at the break of dawn, intelligence reached me that [‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s eldest son and heir] Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar and his motorcade were approaching [al-Mudarrij]. The sentinels reported that his motorcade consisted of fifteen vehicles, each vehicle containing about ten men at arms, and that they were passing through Sufyān on their way to Ṣa‘da in order to offer condolences for the death of a relative of Shaykh Bushayt Abū ‘Ubayd of the tribe of Saḥār. This Abū ‘Ubayd had been active with Ṣādiq in the Iṣlāḥ party.

Passing through al-Mudarrij at an unearthly hour on a Friday morning revealed that Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar clearly feared being drawn into a snare. Mujāhid, for his part, played on time. Part of him wanted to seize the opportunity to attack Ṣādiq’s motorcade immediately, but he had mastered his impulses; no sentries challenged the motorcade when it passed through the bottleneck of al-Mudarrij, and no one came forth to bar his way. In the near darkness of the early morning, Mujāhid and his men contented themselves to closely observe the passing motorcade and to count the men, their cars, and their armaments. Mujāhid knew, on the motorcade’s return from Ṣa‘da, he would not allow Ṣādiq to move freely through al-Mudarrij. He was resolved to risk the ultimate confrontation. Ṣādiq, he knew, would not escape him.

I dispatched a messenger to a man from Sufyān who personally knew Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar to convey to him the intelligence [we had gathered about] his passage. We equipped this man with a radio-telephone with a range of ten kilometres and beseeched him to make haste to Ṣa‘da and attend the funeral in order to observe Ṣādiq and identify his car. He rushed to Ṣa‘da, where he learnt that Ṣādiq did not plan to attend the funeral ceremony all day long, but to stay only for lunch, for fear of the night. He also identified the Mercedes Benz in the centre of the motorcade in which Ṣādiq was travelling.

Lacking the element of surprise that had facilitated his outbound journey, and obviously apprehensive of problems, Ṣādiq seemed almost desperately anxious to set off again and return by daylight. Meanwhile, in al-Mudarrij, an ambush was being prepared.

It did not require the mobilization of many men to ambush the motorcade. To be most effective, only a few men carry out the ambush, for a large party would attract unwelcome attention, and their sheer number would reveal their whereabouts and make the enemy retreat from the road on which he wanted to travel. We placed seven men in ambush when we targeted Ṣādiq and his entourage of one hundred fifty bodyguards. [We only needed this number] because the ambush was on our territory in al-Mudarrij, and territory always makes up half the battle in a military equation.

When the motorcade entered the narrow gap of al-Mudarrij, we opened fire. Our focus was on the back doors of the Mercedes Benz, for we assumed that Ṣādiq was seated in the car's backseat. All those in the rear were killed, including Shaykh Aḥmad 'Abdallāh Ḥusayn Dhaybān, who was travelling with Ṣādiq. Four men were killed and twelve were wounded. Ṣādiq survived, because he had been seated in the front seat, and he and the driver managed to escape. Nothing happened to our side, because we were entrenched and had set up the ambush, and we were in the advantageous position. When the motorcade came under our fire, they did not even stop to confront us but accelerated in speed to escape from the bottleneck of al-Mudarrij. In the tumult, we managed to capture the last car of the motorcade, but we set it free soon after when we learnt that our captives were tribesmen of Banī Ṣuraym. They were useless to our blood revenge issue because they did not belong to al-Aḥmar tribal segment of al-'Uṣaymāt. Later, the problem with *bayt* Dhaybān was solved the tribal way.³⁵

The incident caused an uproar. Sanaa was startled as if by a cannon shot. By ambushing and shooting at Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar and his motorcade, Mujāhid had committed an act of highway banditry, and the ambush demonstrated beyond doubt that the feuds of the YAR continued to haunt a united Yemen. A substantial response to chastise Mujāhid was not long in coming. At the insistence of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, and at the behest of Ṣāliḥ, General 'Alī Muḥsin sent the First Armoured Division (Firqa) on a punitive campaign to Sufyān.

The next day, we heard that the Firqa was advancing on us. 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar wanted to deal us a painful blow through a military campaign and make an exemplary case of me as a lesson for others, because I had

35 The "tribal way" refers to tribal mediation.

ambushed and almost killed his eldest son and heir; [he did this] so that no one would again dare to target him or his family. Because of their common Islamist convictions, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was the elder influence behind ‘Alī Muḥsin, and al-Aḥmar commanded ‘Alī Muḥsin as he pleased. They were both *ikhwanjī*.³⁶

The Firqa instantly started an offensive against us when it reached our area. The Sufyān rushed to my side, and so did Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān of Arḥab, who had suffered a similar fate from the regime and al-Aḥmar, and who helped to confront the Firqa until it stopped its advance on a mountain ridge overlooking our villages. We had entrenched ourselves on the opposite mountain ridge. ‘Alī Muḥsin demanded nothing less than our total submission and that I surrender myself to him, but I refused. I entertained no doubt that this time the matter was serious, that the life of his soldiers was nothing to ‘Alī Muḥsin, that his aim was to eliminate me, and that the Firqa would continue to confront us until it had achieved this aim. I knew that they were going to kill me.

The sentiment prevailing in Sanaa was that the Ḥaydar problem must be resolved, and with the offensive of the Firqa, the moment had come to chastise the shaykh who had already been, despite his age – he was but twenty years old – the centre of innumerable rebellions. ‘Alī Muḥsin’s campaign made it plain that there would be no negotiations and that the Firqa was firmly determined to put an end to Mujāhid’s prolonged and tenacious opposition.

Having lured Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar into a snare and now finding himself trapped by the Firqa, Mujāhid refused to give up this hopeless struggle, as someone less determined might have done in his place. When he reflected on his predicament and the aims of those with whom he was struggling, he began to view his situation more clearly, and an idea began to mature in his mind. And as chance had helped him so often before, a number of developments played into his hands.

3 Talāḥum Conference (1991)

In the early 1990s, throughout highland Yemen it was felt that for the past two decades many things had gone wrong between the state and many tribes, and that now, at the dawn of the new republic, the time had come to rectify these

36 A derogatory term for members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

relationships. The years of domestic stalemate of the late YAR were over, and Yemeni unification had sparked a surge of political activism and public activity among the tribes, comparable to the tribal initiatives that had accompanied the violent change in the system in the 1960s.³⁷ The period of “unfettered public debate and discussion”³⁸ after Yemeni unity involved a great deal of soul-searching and was inspired by a deep sense of peril arising from the politics of divide and rule pursued by Ṣāliḥ vis-à-vis many tribes. Throughout highland Yemen tribesmen began to gather and, often with remarkable success, sought solutions to old, seemingly intractable disputes and tribal feuds that had long plagued them – conflicts that often had been created or nourished by the government. It was this efflorescence of public activity and tribal solidarity, the general spirit of reform, that gave Mujāhid the chance to free himself from the distress into which the attack on Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar had left him.

We decided to send messages to the shaykhs and *‘uqqāl* of Bakīl and called on them to gather in an area called al-Rakiyya in the territory of the Arḥab tribe. When the government saw the shaykhs and *‘uqqāl* of Bakīl responding and flocking to al-Rakiyya, it stopped the offensive of the Firqa and eventually withdrew ‘Alī Muḥsin’s forces from the mountain range overlooking our villages. Because the power of the regime rested on the fragmentation (*tafarruq*) of the Bakīl tribes and their weakness, which was caused by internal conflicts and rivalries, the government was [unhappy at the prospect of being] confronted with a nearly united tribal front. Numerically, the Bakīl are the largest tribe of the highlands and the northern steppe, far larger than the Ḥāshid. Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar knew very well that ultimately, it is the Bakīl tribes who make the rulers in Sanaa, and that any government in Sanaa stands and falls with the support of the Bakīl. To this day the Bakīl wield this power, and united they could easily paralyze any government, even that of the Ḥūthīs, all because the soil of the capital, Sanaa, is *bakīlī*, and the mountains surrounding the capital are *bakīlī*. Hence, when the Bakīl gather, rulers get alarmed.

37 The civil war of the 1960s also saw a series of tribal conferences in which the tribes sought to discuss political positions and solutions to national problems. The tribal conferences of ‘Amrān (1963), Erkwit (1964), Khamir (1965), Ḥaraḍ (1965), etc. were held according to tribal customs and were at the heart of the political arrangements that ended the war. Tribal conferences also took place in the 1970s and 1980s, see Dresch 1989: 361–379; and al-Sharjabī 2009: 65–69.

38 Carapico 1993b: 2.

Al-Rakiyya in Arḥab is a famous area with a water cistern; indeed *rakiyya* is a word for cistern. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān of Arḥab, who assisted me in selecting the location and corresponding with the other shaykhs, identified al-Rakiyya for two reasons. First, because it is a fortified place surrounded by mountains. The second reason is the most important: al-Rakiyya is a central area located between Bakīl Ma’rib, Bakīl Ṣa’dā, and Bakīl Ṭawq Sanaa [i.e., Sanaa’s “collar tribes”].³⁹ After meeting for a number of days, however, we felt that it was a remote place and all services were far away, so we decided to transfer the meeting from al-Rakiyya to the area of Jawb in the country of the tribes of ‘Iyāl Surayḥ and al-Jabal in the Rayda district in ‘Amrān governorate because of its better connection to local infrastructure and services.

In Jawb, the al-Rakiyya joined other tribal gatherings that had sprung up throughout the highlands. The largest gathering originated in Ṣa’dā and worked successfully on mediation and truce-making in complex tribal conflicts, those which the government had failed to resolve or in whose creation, it was widely suspected, the government even had a hidden hand. This gathering soon went beyond Ṣa’dā and became a much wider initiative; the parties to it began to move from place to place, from one site to the next: from Ṣa’dā to al-Jawf, and from al-Jawf to Arḥab, cumulatively negotiating local conflicts.⁴⁰ This large gathering in Arḥab, which began in November 1991 with the coalescence of multitudinous tribal initiatives, became known as Mu’tamar al-Talāḥum al-Waṭanī (National Cohesion Conference).⁴¹ The Talāḥum Conference gathered more than ten thousand tribesmen; traditional drummers, distinctive tribal dances, and poetry readings lent it a festive quality. The participants camped in tents and women baked heaps of bread from flour donated by the shaykhs.

The Talāḥum Conference was not the first major tribal conference after Yemeni unity in 1990. The initial move was made shortly after unification by the Mu’tamar al-Taḍāmun li-l-Qabā’il al-Yamaniyya (Solidarity Conference of the Yemeni Tribes), which convened in October 1990, and in which several

39 Sanaa’s so called “collar tribes” (*qabā’il ṭawq Ṣan’a’*), whose territories border the capital, are Banī Ḥushaysh, Banī l-Ḥārith, Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, Sanḥān, Banī Maṭar, Hamdān Ṣan’a’, and Arḥab. Of the seven collar tribes, only Sanḥān and Hamdān Ṣan’a’ are Ḥāshid tribes.

40 On further details of the tribal conflicts discussed in this initiative, see Dresch 1995: 47–48; and Carapico 1998: 163–166.

41 On the Talāḥum Conference, see also Yemen Times, 25 December 1991; Carapico 1993b: 3–4; Carapico 1998: 163–165; Dresch 1995: 47–52; Kostiner 1996: 41; and Nāṣir 2015: 103–104.

thousand tribesmen from al-Bayḍā' to al-Jawf participated.⁴² Both conferences – Talāḥūm and Taḍāmūn – were “highly contested political spaces” that served as platforms on which the tribes discussed their problems, political visions, and the kind of relationships between tribes and the state they desired.⁴³ Their common belonging to Yemen's tribal realm and its norms and values – the “tribal register” – allowed cooperation and communication despite differences over national politics.⁴⁴

The Taḍāmūn Conference of 1990 addressed all Yemeni tribes, but mainly represented the Ḥāshid and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who had convened the conference chiefly to communicate his political views (these found their expression in the Iṣlāḥ party programme) and to rally support among the tribes. The Taḍāmūn's political orientations were based on 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's preferences: it was pro-Saudi, contra-Iraq, concerned at the expulsion of thousands of Yemeni labourers from Saudi Arabia in punishment for Sanaa's vote in the Gulf crisis, and strongly advocated the Islamic character of the Yemeni constitution.⁴⁵ The Taḍāmūn Conference was fiercely anti-socialist – the 1972 Bayḥān massacre was brought up in discussions and used to intensify domestic political tensions and incite to violence and hatred against the YSP.⁴⁶ Participating tribesmen tried to address tribal issues, but were drowned out by the interests and positions of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's newly founded Iṣlāḥ party and the hard core Ḥāshid tribes (Hamdān Sanaa and Sanḥān; partly also Khārif and Banī Ṣuraym – tribes that had managed to secure jobs in the army and the civil service). There was resistance to the Taḍāmūn Conference even among the al-'Uṣaymāt, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's home tribe, because al-'Uṣaymāt had benefited very little from the political empowerment of *bayt* al-Aḥmar, and in the early 1990s half of al-'Uṣaymāt would have elected the YSP.⁴⁷

By contrast, the “tribal register” of the Talāḥūm Conference of 1991 was Bakīl, although the conference was not expressly held on the Bakīl's behalf.

42 On the Taḍāmūn Conference, see Dresch 1993: 73–74; Dresch 1995: 46–47; and Carapico 1998: 163–164. Despite his own prominent role the Taḍāmūn Conference, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar does not refer to this conference in his memoirs (2008), presumably because the conference had only limited success. Likewise Abū Laḥūm, who was otherwise a meticulous diary writer, did not mention the Taḍāmūn or the Talāḥūm Conference, yet goes into great detail in elaborating on the 1992 Saba' Conference (see below).

43 Carapico 1998: 165.

44 Dresch 1995: 46.

45 Dresch 1995: 46; Carapico 1998: 165.

46 On the resolutions of the Taḍāmūn Conference, see Dresch 1995: 46–47. On the Bayḥān massacre of 1972 and its afterlife, see Brandt 2019.

47 Dresch 1995: 41.

The Talāḥum Conference took place in ‘Amrān in order to “raise the morale of the tribes of Sufyān and ‘Iyāl Surayḥ that were, because of their geographical location, under the heel of the Ḥāshid and had to endure painful persecution by the government,” as the Yemeni newspaper *al-Wasaṭ* put it.⁴⁸ Mujaḥid Ḥaydar recalled that

All shaykhs and ‘*uqqāl* of Bakīl attended. And many tribesmen, I couldn’t count, so many camps ... At the head of the shaykhs were Muḥammad Abū Laḥūm, Muḥammad al-Ghādir, Amīn al-‘Ukaymī, and Muḥammad Yaḥyā l-Ghūlī. And Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān of Arḥab. And Shaykh Muḥsin Abū Nuṣṭān. And many other shaykhs. All shaykhs of Bakīl attended, even those patronized by the system. They all accepted our invitation because it was issued as a grand summons of Bakīl (*dā’i kabīr li-qabā’il Bakīl*), as a call of brotherhood (*dā’i l-mukhwa*). For every shaykh feared that if he does not respond to the call of his brother, his brother might not respond to his call in times of need.

The only shaykh who did not attend was [the senior shaykh of Bakīl] Nājī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shāyif. He seemed to believe that we would take action against him at our conference and issue a decision to cancel his shaykhdom [as the senior shaykh] of Bakīl. Indeed many shaykhs and tribesmen who attended our conference suggested nullifying the shaykhdom of al-Shāyif, because he was only a stooge [of Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar] who did nothing to confront the regime’s conspiracy against Bakīl. In the end, we decided not to do anything against al-Shāyif, lest we give al-Aḥmar the opportunity to exploit it and create [another] internal conflict among the Bakīl [tribes].

Politically, the Talāḥum Conference was the counterpart of the Taḍāmun Conference. The Talāḥum was anti-Saudi and fiercely pro-unity with the South. It arose out of the coalescence of tribal conflict resolution initiatives; hence, one of its main concerns was to discuss the role of state politics in the emergence and prolongation of these conflicts and to seek possibilities of rectification.

Coming from Sufyān’s theatre of war where he had barely escaped death, Mujaḥid emerged as one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Talāḥum Conference. In Jawb, he found an attentive and sympathetic audience that met

48 *Al-Wasaṭ* 10 November 2010. In the early 1990s, ‘Iyāl Yazīd and ‘Iyāl Surayḥ favoured Aden, see Dresch 2000: 184.

him with interest and understanding. His shaykhly peers were impressed by Aḥmad Ḥaydar's heir who, despite his youth, possessed adamant convictions, a war-hardened, incorruptible determination to fight against the regime, and a rhetorical eloquence that impressed them and the masses. And here, in front of the Talāḥum Conference's ten thousand participants, and supported by a speech manuscript and a crackling handheld microphone, Mujāhid took his first steps as a political orator when he spoke to the audience about the policy of extermination *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the state implemented against his family. He gave such a moving version of this conflict that almost everyone took his side. The Talāḥum Conference gave Mujāhid a platform to justify his campaign against the regime, in the name of a higher tribal, patriotic, and historic duty. Beyond all political issues, he managed to give to this conflict – which stood as a symbol for the general situation of the Bakīl – a grand moral element, a simple but instantly appealing message of personal experience.

Inspired by the success of the Talāḥum Conference and stimulated by the climate of political liberalization (the early 1990s saw the formation of around 45 political parties) in the consultation meetings of the Talāḥum Conference Mujāhid Ḥaydar and 'Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān came forward with a proposal to form a political party, a suggestion that was met with interest from those present. It goes without saying that the two initiators themselves planned to play a prominent role in this Talāḥum party. The proposed register shift from the tribal to the political was an audacious and impressive step, though one as deficient in planning and deliberation as it was abundant with unpleasant repercussions, as the events of the coming months show.

Indeed, the ten thousand participants of the Talāḥum Conference, and in many respects the confederation of Bakīl at large, resembled a vast, almost unused reservoir of followers for one seeking supporters. Šāliḥ punished the Talāḥum – like other tribally-based conferences – with deliberate neglect. The socialists in Aden, however, recognized the potential of this tribal gathering and the idea of the Talāḥum party. The remains of the Bakīl-Aden axis of the early 1980s still existed, albeit weakened, and some informal communication channels between the North and South were still in place. Despite – or rather because of – the brutal suppression of the NDF in the 1980s, Bakīl and Aden had many common objectives. And the disruption – between the Bakīl and Sanaa, between YSP and GPC/Iṣlāḥ, between President Šāliḥ and Vice President al-Biḍ – had reached alarming levels.

What drew the attention of the YSP to the great Bakīl conference was the large number of people who attended it, and after the YSP saw the size of our gathering, they sent people to Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān and

me, who told us, “Your conference deserves respect, and we wish to bring forward a proposal for the use of this large human gathering” (*al-tajma‘ al-basharī al-kabīr*).

We asked them what they meant, and they said, “Šāliḥ and al-Aḥmar refuse to implement the Unity Agreement [the Sanaa Accord of 1990 between the YAR and PDRY], and their refusal exposes Yemen to the danger of war and secession. Let your conference adopt demands that are compatible with the Unity Agreement, and then present these demands to us on one side and to Šāliḥ and al-Aḥmar on the other side. Whoever rejects your demands is your enemy, and whoever agrees with them is your friend; and we, the socialists, will agree with them.”

After this, the YSP emissaries assisted in drafting the resolutions of the Talāḥum Conference and transforming them from the demands of a tribal gathering into the resolutions of a political party. The resolutions of the Talāḥum Conference and thus the programme of the Talāḥum party were drafted by the YSP. All of them were patriotic decisions in line with the Unity Agreement.

Hence, the “urban intellectuals” who helped draft the 33-point resolution might in fact have been these emissaries of the YSP.⁴⁹ The first of the 33 resolutions that passed at the end of the Talāḥum Conference was (in accord with the very aim behind the convocation of the conference) the demand for state assistance (rather than sabotage) in resolving and ending tribal conflicts. Resolution number 2 emphasized “equality among the people in exercising their rights and in performing their duties irrespective of their geographic origin and tribal affiliation,” and added that “tribal elders and public figures must be treated with equal dignity and social standing.”⁵⁰ The resolution created a strong yet not too obvious link to the YSP, its representatives, and the compatriots in the South at large, who likewise felt wronged and excluded by the regime in Sanaa that was working against the complete merger of both states (or, more precisely, against the merger and power sharing of their governing elites) and against the elimination of the effects of partition.

Most other resolutions concerned staples of good governance, such as the fight against corruption, fiscal restraint, administrative reform, etc. Some of the “tribal” resolutions seemed tailored to Mujaḥid. Resolution 17, “to nullify tribal realignment, i.e., one tribe breaking away from its current tribal association

49 Carapico 1993b: 4. A full list of the resolutions of the Talāḥum Conference has been translated into English and published by the Yemen Times, 25 December 1991.

50 Yemen Times, 25 December 1991.

and joining another tribe, [because] this is the source of many tribal disputes and conflicts,” seemed to refer to the problem with the Dhū ‘Aybān* and their flight to al-‘Uṣaymāt in the late 1980s.⁵¹ Resolution 20, to “withdraw the army from positions on mountaintops overlooking the tribes,” was a reference to the theatre of war in Sufyān from which Mujāhid had just escaped.

At the end of the Talāḥum Conference, all agreed to continue the meetings in Sanaa in order to set up the structure of the Talāḥum party. Hidden in the crowds of men returning from the Talāḥum Conference, I slipped through the security checkpoints in Sanaa, and we held a number of meetings in the Sanaa house of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sinān, because I didn’t have a house in Sanaa.

This was also the time when my communication with [the general secretary of the YSP and vice president] ‘Alī Sālim al-Bīḍ began. At the time of the Talāḥum Conference, the relationship between Ṣāliḥ and al-Bīḍ was already marked by disagreements. There was a public meeting between al-Bīḍ and the shaykhs in Sanaa in which al-Bīḍ spoke about his disagreement with Ṣāliḥ because Ṣāliḥ was blocking the implementation of the Unity Agreement. Al-Bīḍ told us, “Before unity, we supported many of the sons of the North with money and weapons, in the name of the NDF, which was working to achieve Yemeni unity. And after unity we looked for these northerners, because we had expected that they would wait for us and receive us in Sanaa. Regrettably, none of them received us.” But from his talk it transpired that he knew about my armed struggle, and that I was one of the few who was still actively confronting Ṣāliḥ and his regime. Of course, this public meeting did not yet establish a real acquaintance and friendship [between us]. This only came later when, several times, al-Bīḍ asked me to meet him in Aden, and I remained at his side until the socialists were defeated in the war of 1994.

After their first meeting in Sanaa, Mujāhid went to Aden several times to coordinate with al-Bīḍ. In fact Mujāhid no longer had a choice. He was at war with the regime, his resources were exhausted, and building the Talāḥum party required a healthy financial reserve that would enable him to finance a project of this sort. When he approached al-Bīḍ, Mujāhid was certainly not so innocent as to forget that the socialists in Aden considered tribalism in general, and tribal leaders in particular, as the “primary social enemy” (*al-‘aduww al-ijtimā’ī*

51 *Yemen Times*, 25 December 1991. On the conflict with the Dhū ‘Aybān,* see chapter 2.

l-awwal).⁵² In ideological terms, he did not think of himself as a socialist in any way. Rather, Mujāhid was resolved to revive his family's old strategic alliance with Aden because it promised to satisfy his need for financial resources, matériel, and political support in his campaign against the regime, not, as he put it, because of the "ideological junk."

For his part, al-Biḍ, in his efforts to sound out the chances of cooperating with northern opposition shaykhs and possibly revive the tribal-socialist axis of the 1980s, could not help falling into an insoluble dilemma. In fact, the socialists in Aden knew very well that the northern shaykhs could only be attracted by considerable financial and material concessions that bore a striking resemblance to the existing system of GPC power and patronage. Communism preached about the utopia of a modern and egalitarian society, and officially, Aden had always been against tribalism and the aberrations of patronage. For years, the South had condemned *‘ashā’iriyya* (tribalism) and identified it with *iqṭā’iyya* (feudalism). But however repellent the tribal system of the North seemed to the socialists in Aden – the time had come for anti-Ṣāliḥ forces to close ranks and work together. The alliance between al-Biḍ and Mujāhid sprang from their common enmity to Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar, nothing more. In spite of all their differences, they had one common element: opposition to the regime in Sanaa. After all, and as Yemeni politics had shown so often in history, the end justifies the means; and while rendering "justice" to disadvantaged northern shaykhs and tribes, the true aim was to deal Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar a blow. Opposition to the regime and the determination not to yield were the two fundamental motivations that brought them together.

Ṣāliḥ's reactions to the tribally organized conferences were all strongly negative. The president's uncanny silence – he never vouchsafed an answer to the demands formulated by the tribes, and their telegrams remained unanswered⁵³ – lends some support to the conjecture that he was seriously annoyed by this new spirit of tribal unity and grassroots activism. It irked him that the Taḍāmun Conference of 1990 promoted Islamism and the political programme of Iṣlāḥ party among the tribes, and that it was a mass event clearly associated with the political agendas of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and the Saudis. Equally vexing was the Talāḥum Conference of 1991, which was actively sabotaged by the government: visitors were kept away, the press was blocked, and at least three

52 Nāṣir 2015: 103.

53 Dresch 1995: 47.

shaykhs who had participated in the Talāḥum Conference became targets of assassination attempts, two of them successful.⁵⁴

The Bakīl could not help being annoyed. They were used to unfair treatment and neglect; but Ṣāliḥ's striking silence in response to their demands was a marked diplomatic slight. There were many reasons for Ṣāliḥ's lack of response. The way he reacted to the launch of the Talāḥum party revealed his perplexity: the party's rise was too spontaneous for him to respond. Its internal structure was still so rudimentary that its impact on the political scene was hard to assess. Even so, Ṣāliḥ regarded the Talāḥum party, which was closely affiliated with the interests of the Bakīl, as a menace. His first countermeasure was aimed at stopping the party's financial support from Aden.

After the conclusion of the Talāḥum Conference, Ṣāliḥ was displeased. He had not bothered to send his agents to participate in the Talāḥum Conference in order to subvert it and steer it to his path, as was his practice with opposition parties. He might have thought that the Talāḥum Conference was only a tribal gathering discussing the tribal issues of Bakīl. It came as an unpleasant surprise when the Talāḥum Conference led to the creation of a political party.

In response, Ṣāliḥ sought to thwart my efforts and disrupt my relationship with al-Biḍ. The fact was that some of the shaykhs who had been with us at the Talāḥum Conference in Arḥab were on Ṣāliḥ's payroll. And Sanaa leaked this information indirectly (through "double intelligence," *al-mukhābarāt al-muzdawaja*) to al-Biḍ and the socialist leaders in Aden, and alerted them to the fact that a number of shaykhs involved in the Talāḥum Conference were Ṣāliḥ loyalists whose aim was to deter al-Biḍ from supporting the Talāḥum party and fuel his distrust vis-à-vis the northern shaykhs. And indeed, Ṣāliḥ succeeded in sowing seeds of suspicion in al-Biḍ's mind, for in some cases these were not just rumours without foundation. This disquieted al-Biḍ and eventually made him stall the Talāḥum party's financial support. Yet Ṣāliḥ proved unable to discredit me personally in the eyes of al-Biḍ, because I had proven my commitment to confront Ṣāliḥ in the most extraordinary ways, and my conflict with him had reached the level of armed confrontation, and this left no room for doubt.

54 Dresch 1995: 51; Kostiner 1996: 41. On the assassination problem during the transition period, see Nāṣir 2015: 103–104.

The fact that the Talāḥum Conference and the Talāḥum party had signified a kind of turning point in Mujaḥid's career and set the stage for his emergence as a political agitator was equally disturbing for Šāliḥ. Mujaḥid had freed himself from the morass of tribal vengeance and feuding with *bayt al-Aḥmar*, which had bogged down his family since 1981, and had risen to Šāliḥ's domain, that of national politics. Mujaḥid produced the very same plans he had inherited from his father and which he had further developed years before in his struggles against *bayt al-Aḥmar* and the regime. The difference was that he presented it as a political programme. Finally, Mujaḥid's insolent bravery and assertiveness in apparently hopeless situations took him to the top of a party that, albeit of dubious structure and still in a state of formation, had entered into an alliance with Šāliḥ's enemies, the socialists in Aden.

Šāliḥ considered the subject of Bakīl and the Talāḥum party sensitive issues. One day, when I was at home in Sufyān, I was surprised to receive a phone call from him. "Mujaḥid," he said to me, "hear me out. Your folly exceeds all bounds. You stand a chance of getting chastised ... If you don't terminate this Bakīl project, we will teach you a lesson." I laughed and said, "Certainly the same lesson you have taught my father!" and hung up on him. I remember the phone number on which I was talking with him because it was a landline with a number easy to memorize, such as 299999.

4 Pseudo-Concessions (1992)

In June 1992, and in anticipation of the legislative elections that were scheduled for the fall of that same year (later postponed to April 1993), the Iṣlāḥ party was preparing for a high-level summit meeting of sympathetic tribes, tribal leaders, politicians, and social figures at al-Gharas Camp near Ṣa'da city.⁵⁵ Given the highly politicized environment of Ṣa'da – a famous centre of Zaydi tradition and learning and the home of important sayyid families, but also the home of Yemen's largest Salafi teaching centre in Dammāj – inclusivity was a top priority for the Iṣlāḥ party, and handpicked guests from the ranks of "Shiites and Sunnis and Wahhabis and Socialists and Unionists and people of that sort" were invited to attend.⁵⁶ Contingents from many tribes, Ḥāshid tribes

55 On the 1992 Iṣlāḥ summit in Ṣa'da, see also Dresch and Haykel 1995.

56 Dresch and Haykel 1995: 417.

in particular, took part out of political conviction or solidarity with ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, their senior shaykh and the head of the Iṣlāḥ party. Attending in full tribal regalia, and carrying all sorts of weapons, they lent a festive character to the summit. Leftist observers complained that the Iṣlāḥ summit resembled a tribal gathering more than a “civilized political rally” – a comment that was as derisive as it was hypocritical.⁵⁷

The days leading up to the Iṣlāḥ meeting were filled with nervous activity. Ṣa‘da reverberated with visitors and preparations. Sufyān appeared tranquil, yet this impression was deceptive, as the Sufyān were also in a heightened state of vigilance, with sentries posted at the highway carefully watching the traffic. In al-Mudarrij, Mujāhid Ḥaydar and his men were preparing for the approach of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who was expected to come from Sanaa to preside over the Iṣlāḥ summit.

All at once, we got word that ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his motorcade had crossed the border into Sufyān. He wanted to attend the Iṣlāḥ meeting at al-Gharas camp, and I was determined not to grant him any rights to passage. To this end, we gathered our men and blocked the narrow [gap] of al-Mudarrij. We held the road for three days, until al-Aḥmar gave in. He sent a team of mediators to convince me to let him pass, but I refused. I was not satisfied with this mediation. Al-Aḥmar was resolved to give me whatever I want, so that in return I would terminate the revenge issue between us. But he wanted this mediation to remain secret. I refused any secret dialogue. Above all I did not want to accept material compensation. Do you think the reparation that blood money gives is sufficient to pay for the death of your father and your siblings? And allows him, who caused years of misery and distress, to get away with paying a few riyals?

Finding his passage blocked, and unable to move forward or back without risking either an armed clash or an irremediable loss of face, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar saw himself forced to deal with the allegations put forward by Mujāhid Ḥaydar. Al-Aḥmar’s attempt at secret mediation shows that he would have preferred to settle the matter quietly with the payment of blood money. But Mujāhid did

57 Dresch and Haykel 1995: 417. The negative attitude of leftist commentators on the tribal rally shows the hypocrisy of the parties as it relates to the tribes, for the YSP itself was vying for northern tribal support. At the same time, Ṣāliḥ also gained influence with the southern tribes with the aim of rekindling the power of the tribal groups which the YSP had tried to reduce during the PDRY period and which loathed YSP anti-tribal policies, see Kostiner 1996: 28.

not want an informal deal, or any deal at all. In his view, the feud was beyond the stage of settlement through material compensation. The honour and reputation of *bayt* Ḥaydar were at stake, and only blood would end the years of feuding and the scores of victims. Only revenge would restore his honour; mediation would sully it further. After some futile discussions on the possibility or impossibility of a deal, al-Aḥmar changed strategy and came forward with another proposal.

When the secret mediation failed to produce results and the road remained blocked, al-Aḥmar offered to send one hundred “rifles of clearance” (*banādiq al-ṣāfw*) in order to get out of the impasse. According to tribal tradition (*silf*), offering rifles of clearance signalled his desire to clear himself from our accusations. The clearance process would further require that he choose a shaykh and we also choose a shaykh who would investigate the case according to tribal law and then pass a judgement on the legality of the clearance. [This was] like a trial in which the two shaykhs judge in the light of the evidence.

In tribal custom, the process of “clearance” (*muṣāfā* or *muhkālīṣa*) restores a relation between two disputants, such that it becomes as clear and pure as it was before the dispute. The aim of the clearance process is for the accused to deny any involvement in a dispute, and through the provision of the rifles, one group asks to “opt out” of the conflict.⁵⁸ The other party is free to accept or reject the rifles offered.⁵⁹ The party accepting the rifles shows its willingness to talk and temporarily refrain from violence by holding the rifles as “tokens of obligation until the obligation is discharged.”⁶⁰ After the completion of the clearance process, the rifles are returned.

In truth, however, neither side was seriously interested in going through the clearance process. Al-Aḥmar’s intention behind this move was all too obvious. By handing over the rifles, he would force Mujāhid to temporarily renounce violence and unblock the road to Ṣaʿda. Mujāhid, for his part, had good reason to suspect that one single shot at ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar or his motorcade would be counted as another act of highway banditry and again lead to a punitive campaign against him by the armed forces; this would mean a repetition of the

58 Dresch 1989: 86–87.

59 In tribal custom, the surrender of guns can take on the function of pledges or sureties, see Abū Ghānim 1985: 269; Dresch 1986: 316; Dresch 1987b: 77 n. 16; Dresch 1989: 51; and Weir 2007: 114, 171–174. On tribal customs in relation to small arms, see also Heinze 2014.

60 Dresch 1989: 87.

debacle of the previous year, after the ambush of Šādiq al-Aḥmar, but likely in a more fatal manner. He knew very well that he was not strong enough to face a confrontation of this sort again – the unanimity of the regime's reaction to his last ambush had taught him that he would have to proceed more carefully. Despite his repugnance, he found himself forced to accept the clearance deal for lack of a better alternative. The handing over of the clearance rifles was just a ruse to free both parties from the impasse that was becoming more unbearable by the hour.

I decided to accept the rifles of clearance and open the road because I thought it better to get one hundred rifles than to confront 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his large armed escort hailing from diverse Ḥāshid tribes. For we would have opened blood debts with many other tribes if we attacked them.

Al-Aḥmar only offered the rifles of clearance in order to unblock the highway. His men handed over ten rifles, and commissioned *bayt* al-Shāyif to deliver the remaining ninety, but in the end they didn't. And after his return from Ša'da, al-Aḥmar evaded the completion of the clearance and the trial process.

For my part, I also did not want to solve the problem and close the file, not by secret mediation nor through the clearance process. I only wanted the rifles, and [after the termination of the clearance process] I did not give them back. None of us were sincere. [We were like] a serpent entwined with another serpent (*thu'bān yaluf 'alā thu'bān*). If I can put it like that.

They parted with nothing accomplished. Nevertheless, the sham negotiations had served their purpose. The looming confrontation was smoothed over with the provision of the first batch of rifles, the road was opened, and this crisis was laid to rest.

'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar still felt uneasy; when we opened the roadblock, his escort had grown to 300 cars, plus many other cars that belonged to the Iṣlāḥ party. And from the other direction [from Ša'da], they were welcomed by further cars that belonged to people from Ša'da [who were] affiliated with Iṣlāḥ. Al-Aḥmar's escort set out to pass through al-Mudarrij in three convoys, each convoy consisting of 100 cars, rendering it impossible for us to figure out which convoy and which car 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was travelling in. We definitely would have been unable to kill him because we had no clue which car to attack.

And on top of all this, they sent the Firqa to secure the road from our village to the end of Sufyān's border with the tribe of Āl 'Ammār of Dahm in Ṣa'da. The military campaign stretched through the entirety of al-'Amashiyya, lest we lay an ambush on 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's return. The Firqa remained in al-'Amashiyya until the end of the Iṣlāḥ summit in Ṣa'da, then they lifted the campaign and withdrew to Sanaa.

In retrospect, both sides seemed relieved that this time they had avoided an open confrontation through these sham negotiations and pseudo-concessions. However, this was not yet the end of the affair. The traffic congestion caused by the roadblock at al-Mudarrij did not dissolve smoothly, and the tension of the three days and the tit-for-tat mentality among the tribes gave way to further upheaval.

After we opened the road, further to the north, Shaykh Ḥamūd Bin 'Azīz, who was a friend of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, held up a group of delegates of the al-Ḥaqq party who also were on their way to Ṣa'da to attend an al-Ḥaqq party conference.⁶¹ Al-Ḥaqq is the complete opposite of the Iṣlāḥ [party, they are] doctrinarian both ideologically and intellectually. The al-Ḥaqq sayyids returned to al-Mudarrij and asked for our support, and we provided them with armed men who ensured their [safe] passage [through Ḥamūd Bin 'Azīz's roadblock], because our dealings with *bayt* Bin 'Azīz were motivated by intransigence (*inād*). Furthermore, the Bin 'Azīz issue had no bearing on the al-Aḥmar issue. The Bin 'Azīz issue was a political issue. The al-Aḥmar issue is a blood issue (*mawḍū' dam*).

5 Saba' Conference (1992)

United Yemen continued to toss about in ever rougher waters. By 1992 (at the latest), enthusiasm had given way to weariness. Reservations arose, and a process of estrangement began to gain momentum, when "the centripetal forces keeping the two parties [GPC and YSP] together were gradually countered by the centrifugal ones pulling them apart."⁶² The unravelling of the unity regime was not just a matter of the increasingly acrimonious struggle between the two

61 On this incident, see also Dresch and Haykel 1995: 416–417. The delegates from al-Ḥaqq were Ḥasan Zayd, Aḥmad al-Shāmī, and Aḥmad Sharaf al-Dīn (personal communication with Ḥasan Zayd, September 2020).

62 Burrowes 1999: 206.

“big men” – the “two ‘Alis” – President ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ and Vice President ‘Alī Sālim al-Biḍ. It was further aggravated by the deterioration of the economy and security conditions, and the growing hostility between the political leaderships of the North and South at large; all of this poisoned the political atmosphere and confounded the unification process.⁶³

In mid-May 1991, on the occasion of the referendum on the constitution, the GPC and the YSP once again tried to put aside their differences in a last effort to preserve the unification process. After this last effort, however, their cooperation gave way to an intense struggle that was triggered by a dispute over control of the armed forces. The YSP, which provided the minister of defence, demanded the immediate merger of the armies in line with the Sanaa Accord, yet their demand was blocked by the GPC, which wanted to prevent the YSP from gaining ground. Popular protests, strikes, and riots began to disrupt public life in Yemen. On top of this, in 1992 a wave of assassinations shook the country; there were more than one hundred assassinations or attempted assassinations of southern politicians, most of them members of the YSP.⁶⁴ In the fall of 1992, national politics entered into a crisis mode when Vice President al-Biḍ withdrew from Sanaa to Aden, citing the cause for his move intimidation, the assassination of YSP officials, the deterioration of the security situation, and the refusal of the GPC to address major problems. This led to a long, awkward boycott of the government in Sanaa. As a result, the legislative elections scheduled for autumn 1992, which were supposed to mark the end of the transition to a unified Yemen, were postponed twice, further adding to the stalemate in national politics.

In Sanaa and Aden, the race for alliances began anew, heightened on all sides by fierce competition and distrust, since everyone knew that it would determine the outcome of political power and military dominance. In this situation, as always, the role of the tribes was felt with particular force. Ṣāliḥ knew most of the Ḥāshid tribes were on his side, but now, after al-Biḍ's withdrawal to Aden, the rivalry between the GPC and YSP over the Bakil entered a new intensity. Both sides knew about the significance of this large, populous, well-armed confederation, which remained the elephant in the room. In the fall of 1992, al-Biḍ again reached out to the shaykhs of Bakil.

After waiting some time for al-Biḍ's invitation to discuss the ways and means to support the Talāḥum party, I was surprised when the office of

63 For the problems of the transition period, see Hudson 1995: 25–31; Kostiner 1996: 22–46; Burrowes 1999; Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 42–72; Day 2012: 110–117; and Nāṣir 2015: 69–75.

64 Day 2012: 126; and Nāṣir 2015: 75–94.

al-Bīḍ contacted me and told me that I and other shaykhs of Bakīl were to receive messages from the YSP headquarters in the provinces concerning the time and place of a new conference. I concluded from this that al-Bīḍ supported my idea of mobilizing the Bakīl, but through a new conference, rather than through the Talāḥum party project that had been successfully thwarted by Ṣāliḥ. I had no choice but to accept al-Bīḍ's request for a new conference because I did not want to lose his support. Before long, we got letters from the socialists regarding the date of the new conference that was to take place in Ma'rib in Wādī Ḍana.

With the country in desperate straits, and the YSP meddling in northern tribal issues, the prospect of a new, even larger Bakīl conference with massive YSP involvement profoundly concerned Ṣāliḥ. Ṣāliḥ had learnt from the Talāḥum Conference, and this time he was prepared to delay, discourage, or co-opt what promised to become another major tribal-political event. The atmosphere surrounding the run-up to the conference was heavy with intrigue and mutual distrust. Under the heading "Endeavours to Let the Conference Fail," Sinān Abū Laḥūm's memoirs note with some irony the way Ṣāliḥ and his cronies rocked back and forth in their attempt to subvert the planned mega event and eventually steer it to their path. Sinān Abū Laḥūm writes,

The day after my return [from a trip], 'Abdallāh b. Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar, 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Arashī, Nājī 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Shāyif and others visited me. All at once they informed me about a tribal conference named Mu'tamar Saba' to be held in Ma'rib, and demanded that I work towards its postponement or cancellation.

I said, "Who is supporting this conference?"

They said, "Many. And you are considered responsible and have the ability to thwart this conspiracy (*hadhihi al-mu'āmarā*)."

I said, "I don't know about it, and God is my witness that I didn't know about this conference until you told me about it. ... I had assumed that you had come to visit me, and I was already wondering why you were gathering."

Shaykh 'Abdallāh [al-Aḥmar] laughed and showed his satisfaction after he made sure that I had no hand in it.

I asked, "When does the conference take place?"

They said, "The day after tomorrow."

I said, "I returned the day before yesterday, and today you want me to take action. What shall I do?"

They said, "Work towards its failure."

I said, "I refuse to be influenced by anyone. And if the conference is patriotic and independent and not controlled [by anyone], then I am for it."

They left me after about an hour.

Then came Aḥmad 'Ubād Sharīf al-Ḍabyānī and Ṣāliḥ Munaṣṣir al-Siyaylī and 'Alī 'Abd Rabbih al-Qāḍī, and they informed me that they had already gathered people in order to convene the conference and that the Nihm tribe had [also] agreed to it.

I said, "I advise you not to appear in this place and your interference in it is in nobody's interest. Leave the people and their concerns, and you would err if you support this conference."

And the [next] morning Muḥammad b. Nājī l-Ghādir and Nājī l-Ṣūfī and others came to me and raised the same issue, the Saba' Conference, and I told them that I was against the tribes belonging to and being controlled by anyone.

They said, "We agree with you," and swore by it, and then others came along and the topic was broadened and a lot of people called me and invited me [to the conference]. After hearing my opinion, even members of the GPC leadership wrote to me saying, "If that is your opinion, take part."

I sent a letter with Rubaysh Ka'lān to Muḥsin b. 'Alī Bin Mu'aylī to show this to everyone at the conference. I wrote in it, "If the conference is patriotic and not controlled by any party, neither from within nor from without, then I am with you."⁶⁵

Sinān Abū Laḥūm divided his visitors into three groups: the first group ('Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, Nājī l-Shāyif, etc.) were representatives of the regime who (unsuccessfully) tried to prevent the Saba' Conference from taking place. The second group (Aḥmad 'Ubād Sharīf, Ṣāliḥ Munaṣṣir al-Siyaylī, etc.) were the YSP supporters; that is, the driving force behind the conference, whom Abū Laḥūm, striving for Bakīl "neutrality," advised (also unsuccessfully) not to attend because of their well-known political connections with Aden. The third group (Muḥammad b. Nājī l-Ghādir, Nājī l-Ṣūfī, etc.) were the GPC leaders, who were sent by Ṣāliḥ when it became clear that the conference would take place despite all attempts to thwart it, and whose presence was designed to counter-balance YSP influence and help assert Ṣāliḥ's interests.

65 Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 54–55. Sinān Abū Laḥūm sought to maintain the "neutral," "balanced" position of an "elder statesman." Nevertheless, he was a central member of the northern political establishment.

Despite all the political manoeuvring, in September 1992 the Mu'tamar Saba' li-l-Qabā'il al-Yamaniyya (Saba' Conference of the Yemeni Tribes) took place in Wādī Ḍana.⁶⁶ It lasted twelve days and was attended by 20,000 tribesmen, most from the ranks of Bakīl and Madhḥij. The name, place, and time of the Saba' Conference conveyed a special symbolic meaning. The venue in Wādī Ḍana invoked the pre-Islamic imagery of the kingdom of Saba'. In the eighth century BCE, the great dam of Ma'rib, one of the engineering wonders of the ancient world and a symbol of the Sabaean and Ḥimyarī kingdoms, had been built at the eastern end of Wādī Ḍana. The Ma'rib dam was also symbolically represented on the centre of the coat of arms of the 1990 presidential seal. Moreover, the Saba' Conference coincided with the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the September 1962 revolution, a circumstance that promised to augur well for the conference's success, but that was seen as a further provocation by the regime.

Wādī Ḍana is the home area of the Banī Ḍabyān of Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl (Bakīl). The shaykh of Banī Ḍabyān and host of the Saba' Conference was Aḥmad 'Ubād Sharīf, whose YSP connections had earned him the nickname *shaykh al-ḥizb* ("the party's shaykh").⁶⁷ Khawlān itself was a tense environment, pervaded by deep political cleavages; historically the tribe had been involved in countless conflicts with neighbouring tribes (Sanḥān, in particular), and Ṣāliḥ had managed to neutralize many Khawlān shaykhs – notably Muḥammad al-Ghādir – by including them in his patronage networks.⁶⁸

Although the Saba' Conference officially proposed a "dialogue with all forces," a strong oppositional spirit prevailed from the beginning. This was documented in spiteful and offensive *zawāmil* (sg. *zāmil*; a kind of tribal poetry) composed on this occasion.⁶⁹ Through the pointed and dialogical form typical of the *zāmil* poetic genre, the poets played on the prevailing political situation. They denounced the corruption and nepotism of al-Aḥmar and the Ḥāshid tribes (Sanḥān, in particular); some even went so far as to draw parallels between the autocratic and despotic leadership styles of Ṣāliḥ and Imam

66 On the Saba' Conference, see Dresch 1995: 50–52; Carapico 1996: 296; Carapico 1998: 165–166; Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 54–56; and Nāṣir 2015: 104.

67 The counterpart was called *shaykh al-mu'tamar*, i.e., "shaykh of the congress." Here "Congress" relates to Ṣāliḥ's party, the General People's Congress.

68 Brandt 2019.

69 Dresch 1995: 50–52; Dresch and Haykel 1995: 422; and Carapico 1998: 163–166. On the poetic genre of the tribal *zāmil*, see Caton 1990; and Caton 2005.

Aḥmad. Others mocked Ṣāliḥ's succession plans for his son, likening Yemen to other sham democracies in the Middle East.⁷⁰

We attended the [Saba'] Conference and with us were many shaykhs and tribesmen of Bakīl, Murād, Madhḥij, and 'Abīda. Many of them came to my tent in order to meet me with affection, because I had confronted Ṣādiq and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar when they were at the height of their power and authority, and [because I] did not fear them. They had not expected anyone to dare to confront 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons. Everyone hated al-Aḥmar and hid that hatred inside his heart and did not dare to utter it. The tribes of Bakīl respected me because I persisted in my opposition to Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar. Many shaykhs had surrendered themselves to Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar in exchange for personal benefits that had nothing to do with the interests of their tribes. These shaykhs are stigmatized among their tribes.⁷¹ But I, thank God, enjoyed their appreciation.

While the Saba' Conference proposed a cross-party dialogue, from the start it suffered from a climate of suspicion and distrust. With reason, the leftists doubted the sincerity of those who were with the northern regime, while the latter in turn, never overcame their deeply rooted suspicion for the socialists in Aden. Conference speeches and resolutions dealt with every major political issue: unity, elections, tribal bloodshed, equal opportunities, corruption, civil service reform, inflation, agricultural production, architectural and environmental preservation, labour migration, the government budget, judicial integrity, political assassinations, economic dependency, private sector development, the utilization of oil revenues, and so on.⁷² When it came to drafting the resolutions, the factions' hidden manoeuvring evolved into an open contest over the direction of the Saba' Conference.

We agreed to form a drafting committee for the resolutions of the conference. Two of Ṣāliḥ's agents took part in the drafting committee, the rest we chose from among those shaykhs who were anti-Ṣāliḥ. The drafting committee was headed by Faḍl 'Abdallāh al-'Awāḍī, may God have mercy on him, who was [later] murdered. And when we began to draft the resolutions, the Ṣāliḥ men drafted weak resolutions that would not

70 Ṣāliḥ's plan of succession through his son Aḥmad was a highly contentious issue, see also chapters 3 and 6.

71 Mujāhid used the term *maḥrūq* ("burned"), see the discussion of this term in chapter 1.

72 Carapico 1996: 296.

irritate Šālih, like “we demand schools and hospitals and roads from the government.”

We rejected these weak resolutions and formulated strong resolutions; we called for the participation [of disadvantaged tribes] in the government and in all the entities of the state, and the formation of a governmental commission to conduct a field survey and identify the areas that were in greatest need of infrastructure and development projects. Of course these were our very own areas. And we demanded a merger of the southern and the northern armies, and the establishment of labour unions, and [we demanded that] elections be held [i.e., the elections that had been postponed from November 1992 to April 1993] on schedule.

Šālih's men refused to approve our resolutions. We told them, “Let the masses judge on the resolutions,” and we gathered, through loudspeakers, all those who attended the Saba' Conference. The chairman of the drafting committee, Faḍl 'Abdallāh al-'Awāḍī, read them our strong decisions that were then approved by 75 per cent of those who attended the Saba' Conference.

Spurred by the success of the vote, and as always when he had arrived at a decisive moment, a feverish urge for action gripped Mujāhid. When the audience had voted on the resolutions of the Saba' Conference, he seized the opportunity to further synchronize with Aden and render a special service to al-Biḍ, so that he could finally succeed in this political project that had so long eluded him. Because, as he later confessed with some bitterness, “I was keen not to lose al-Biḍ, because he protected me in my struggles with Šālih and al-Aḥmar.” After the vote, in excellent spirits, and expecting al-Biḍ's appreciation, he left the conference venue in Wādī Ḍana and headed for Aden – a step that proved to be a grave mistake.

[After the vote] I rushed to Aden. I took with me the chairman of the Drafting Committee, al-'Awāḍī, and the resolutions of the Saba' Conference. We met al-Biḍ in Aden and informed him about everything, and he thanked us for what we had done.

In the meantime, countermeasures were under way. The GPC shaykhs, whom Mujāhid had left behind in Wādī Ḍana, were not too pleased with his impetuousness. They instantly perceived that they could take advantage of his absence, and so began to manoeuvre on questions of timing and agenda. After Mujāhid's departure, there was a “significant shift in the leadership [when] those who had promoted the meeting most vigorously gave place to a broader

coalition and the meeting elected as chairman Muḥammad Nājī l-Ghādir.”⁷³ This “coalition” managed to alter the course of the Saba’ Conference and steer it to their own path.

After we left Aden, the GPC shaykhs whom we had left behind in Wādī Ḍana called al-Bīḍ on the telephone. They reassured him that they agreed with the resolutions that we had just presented to al-Bīḍ, and that there was no dispute between us, yet went on with rather mysterious obscurity that we had rushed our departure and that the resolutions were still in the draft state and were not yet ready and approved. They were working to spoil the results of the Saba’ Conference while making the socialists in Aden feel that they were with them, albeit in reality they were against them.

We were alarmed when the office of al-Bīḍ called us and said, “The shaykhs whom you left behind in Wādī Ḍana have moved to Sanaa and gathered in the house of Muḥammad al-Ghādir in order to discuss the [final] resolutions and the way forward.” You must know that Muḥammad al-Ghādir is the head of the shaykhs who are with Ṣāliḥ, because the socialists in Aden killed his father and 65 other shaykhs of Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl [in 1972 in the Bayḥān massacre].⁷⁴

When we arrived at al-Ghādir’s house in Sanaa, they greeted us with the menacing news that eleven shaykhs, at the head of them al-Ghādir, had formed a general secretariat of the Saba’ Conference; most of them betrayed an invidious penchant for wishing to please Ṣāliḥ. We rejected the formation of this general secretariat, and saw in horror [that] the results of the Saba’ Conference deviated from the results of our vote and were headed to serve the interests of Ṣāliḥ.

The final resolutions of the Saba’ Conference, which were communicated by the general secretariat, at first glance resembled those of the Talāḥum Conference, yet for the most part were generalities.⁷⁵ What remained were platitudes concerning equality, equal opportunities, anti-corruption, good governance, and so forth – resolutions that, having been repeated so many times, seemed

73 Dresch 1995: 51.

74 On the Bayḥān massacre, see Brandt 2019.

75 On the resolutions of the Saba’ Conference, see Dresch 1995: 51–52; Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 56; Nāṣir 2015: 104. Under the joint leadership of Muḥammad al-Ghādir and ‘Alī l-Qibli Nimrān (Murād), the General Secretariat continued to meet periodically afterwards and publish statements.

colourless and without vigour, and lacked the energetic spirit and details that had characterized the Talāḥūm resolutions. The only novelty was resolution 1 of the Saba' Conference, which called for the preservation of Yemeni unity as a historical achievement and the rejection of secession (*infīṣāl*), which the socialists in Aden already considered a possibility. The fact was that in securing Yemeni unity, the interests of Sanaa's political elite were aligned with those of the northern "leftist" dissident tribes, for whom secession and thus the loss of their southern alliance partner and protector were an equally worst case scenario. On closer inspection, the Saba' Conference, which had promised to become the most important tribal-political event of the transition period between 1990 and 1993, became a farce.

6 The Noose Tightens

After the conclusion of the Saba' Conference, with everything running smoothly and working to his advantage, Ṣāliḥ seemed in excellent spirits. Sinān Abū Laḥūm, who visited him in the presidential palace after the Saba' Conference, found him in animated conversation with guests,

a discussion was [taking place] between them, and I felt that there were [verbal] manoeuvres and innuendos and ambiguities, I joined in their discussion and said: "The country is heading towards a dangerous situation, and the style [of your talk] and the words you exchange are nothing but mocking laughter."⁷⁶

On the other side of the political spectrum, a sense of uncertainty and resentment began to take hold. The alliance between the "leftist" northern shaykhs and the YSP was showing cracks. With his fine sense for political moods, Ṣāliḥ exploited the fear factor. Taking advantage of the sense of disconcertion among his adversaries, he tightened the reins and stepped up his struggle against the poison of sedition. When intimidation and threats did not bring results, the regime resorted to harsher means that resulted in a new series of assassinations of shaykhs who were considered too close to Aden.⁷⁷ Mujāhid had long been on Ṣāliḥ's blacklist, and he knew the danger he was in. Indeed, in winter 1992, after the Saba' Conference, Ṣāliḥ set out to follow through with the

⁷⁶ Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 4: 56.

⁷⁷ See also Nāṣir 2015: 75–94.

death threat he had conveyed to Mujāhid over the telephone after the Talāḥum Conference.

All of the content of the conversations that took place between al-Bīḍ and me was leaked to Ṣāliḥ; I don't know how this could have happened, whether Ṣāliḥ had spies in the southern councils or if their offices were bugged ... Because of that, Ṣāliḥ ordered a squadron of eight people from his security brigades [who were] trained in covert operations and targeted assassinations to kill me.

We returned from Aden [to Sufyān] with two cars, and when we left Ma'rib for al-Jawf, we became aware of a jeep and two military vehicles tracking us at some distance. I immediately understood the situation. After we sensed the presence and the intention of our pursuers, we left the asphalt road and turned onto the extensive open sand area connecting Ma'rib and al-Jawf. Indeed, they followed us onto the sand. When there was less than one kilometre between us, we stopped and blocked the desert track with our cars. In the distance, we saw them stopping also. We continued to drive, and they also started to move again. We stopped a second time, and a third time, and a fourth time, and whenever we stopped, we saw them halting a distance [away]. They knew that they could do nothing against us, because we had discovered them.

It seems that they then informed Sanaa or al-Salāmāt checkpoint near al-Kharāba, the village of Shaykh al-ʿIrāqī of Hamdān al-Jawf in the vicinity of al-Ḥazm, and they alerted the soldiers at the checkpoint to prepare themselves to attack us when we approach the barrier. By then night had fallen, and it was pitch dark. I was driving the first car, and when we approached the checkpoint, in the headlights of my car I spotted the soldiers laying with their guns in prone positions at the roadsides, ready to open fire on us. I knew the area like the back of my hand from the years when I was enrolled in school in nearby al-Matūn, so I instantly turned off the car headlights and changed course to the sand in order to leave the asphalt road leading to the barrier, and the second car behind me did the same. A hail of bullets hit our cars, but visibility was poor because of the blackness of the night. The soldiers quickly lost sight of us and continued to shoot in the direction of the road that was plunged into darkness.

When we reached al-Kharāba, the village of Shaykh al-ʿIrāqī, we turned back onto the asphalt, but only crossed it to reach the sand path of al-ʿAṣl beyond the asphalt line. Al-ʿAṣl is the place Shaykh al-ʿUkaymī and Shaykh al-ʿIrāqī once fought to possess. All at once a military vehicle with a group of soldiers and a heavy Russian 12.7 *dushkā* [DShK machine

gun] stood there waiting for us on the asphalt road and followed us onto al-‘Aṣl sand path, but they did not manage to hit us with the machine gun because of the darkness and because their vehicle was shaking from the rough surface of the track. Because they were moving behind us, they were in our line of fire, and my companions began to shoot. We heard the screams of the wounded, and then we heard the military vehicle tumbling off the road chaotically, because the driver had been shot.

We reached Ḥuṣn al-Dayma, the village of Shaykh ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī. I knew that al-‘Ukaymī was waiting for death because of a heart disease. Nevertheless, when he heard of our arrival he invited us to visit him, because he was fond of me, and he had been a close friend of my father, may God rest their souls. But we did not dare to halt and pay a visit to al-‘Ukaymī, because we feared that we were [still] being pursued by the army. We continued to Sūq al-Ithnayn, in the land of Āl Ḥamad of Dhū Ḥusayn [of Wā’ilah], where we felt safe, and beyond the reach of our pursuers.⁷⁸ Our cars were badly damaged, and we had almost run out of fuel, but apart from that, all of us were all right, thank God, and we continued to drive to Sufyān.

Mujāhid arrived in Sufyān in a very bad temper. A few days later, he returned to Ḥuṣn al-Dayma in al-Jawf for the funeral of ‘Alī l-‘Ukaymī, who had succumbed to his heart condition in the meantime; this was the occasion at which Mujāhid, carried away by irascibility and vindictive passions, almost killed Ḥamūd al-Shāyif whom he mistook for ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar.⁷⁹ After that, he withdrew to Sufyān and back to rural life, where he seemed to go through a spell of apathy. He thought the affair of tribal conferences was over and done with; that chapter had been closed, and the exuberance and passionate activism of recent months became a period of inertia and brooding. Though he was usually impetuous and an impassioned campaigner, nothing could rouse his energies and persuade him to take part in another tribal-political event.

From his seclusion in Wāsiṭ, he watched from a distance as the results of the conferences further degenerated into absurdity. After the nerve-wracking

78 Shaykh of Āl Ḥamad of Dhū Ḥusayn Wā’ilah was Muḥammad Ibn Shāji‘, who had been one of Mujāhid’s guarantors during his visit to President Ṣāliḥ in Sanaa in 1988, see chapter 3. In the early 1990s, Ibn Shāji‘ spearheaded the tribal opposition to the planned boundary demarcation between Yemen and Saudi Arabia and their plans to police and fortify the border, see Feldner 2004; al-Enazy 2005: 124; Brandt 2017a: 88–90; and Brandt 2017b: 115–121. Muḥammad Ibn Shāji‘ was assassinated in 2002.

79 See chapter 2.

political tug-of-war at the Saba' Conference, Šāliḥ eventually set out to take full control of future tribal mass gatherings, until the civil war in 1994 put an end to tribal grassroots movements. The Talāḥum and Saba' conferences that had been attended by predominantly Bakīlī and Madhḥijī audiences, were now countered by a conference headed by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and Nāji l-Shāyif – the latter serving to distract from the Bakīlī absence – that went by the name Mu'tamar 'Āmm li-l-Qabā'il al-Yamaniyya (General Conference of Yemeni Tribes) and the establishment of al-Majlis al-'Āmm li-l-Qabā'il al-Yamaniyya (General Council of Yemeni Tribes).⁸⁰ Despite low participation in the conference, the council claimed to speak and issue its YSP-hostile resolutions in the name of "all tribes." Given the factionalism and political cleavages of the time, the proposal for a General Council of Yemeni Tribes headed by 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and representing all the tribes of Yemen must be seen as a monstrous presumption or a stupendous bluff.

In late 1993, when national politics were further paralyzed by a dispute between Šāliḥ and al-Biḍl, who had again retired to Aden and begun a new boycott, Sanaa-based Bakīl shaykhs close to Šāliḥ formed a council called al-Majlis al-Mawaḥḥad li-Qabā'il Bakīl al-Yamaniyya (the United Council for Bakīl tribes of Yemen) that in early January 1994 held the Mu'tamar Bakīl (Bakīl Conference) in the area of al-Šarāra in 'Amrān province.⁸¹

They invited me [to the Bakīl Conference] but I decided to stay away from it. This new Bakīl Conference was a copy designed by Šāliḥ who commissioned some shaykhs of Bakīl, who were close to him, to invite the Bakīl to a new conference in the area of al-Šarāra. He sought to neutralize the Bakīl in anticipation of the war he planned to wage against the southerners, lest the Bakīl come out in armed support of Aden. Yet the shaykhs [who organized the Bakīl Conference] did not succeed in creating a link to the grassroots of the Bakīl tribes, because it was known that they were Šāliḥ's agents. They were all Šāliḥ's creatures (*makhluqāt 'Afāsh*).

In April 1994, a month before the outbreak of the civil war, the last Bakīl-related "conference" of this short period took place. It was a period that had begun with jubilation at the achievement of national unity gained by peaceful means, but had failed to master the enormous challenges that awaited the united nation. This "conference" had no name and rather resembled a large

80 Carapico 1996: 296–297; *al-Wasaṭ* 10 November 2010; and Nāṣir 2015: 104.

81 Carapico 1996: 296–297; Dresch 1995: 52; and *al-Wasaṭ*, 10 November 2010.

camp-out at ‘Iyāl Surayḥ. At the same time, hastily arranged talks between Ṣāliḥ and al-Bīḍ under the sponsorship of Sultan Qābūs in Oman failed to bring the reconciliation process back on track, and the first armed incident between northern and southern army units occurred in Dhamār. Due to the harbingers of war, and the spirit of militarization that had gripped the country, the camp in ‘Iyāl Surayḥ was ringed by several square miles of artillery and fortifications. The tribes involved blocked the roads to “Ḥāshid-owned” (mainly al-Aḥmar and Sanḥān) trucks entering the northern capital – actions that the government in Sanaa regarded as a YSP-backed provocation to war.⁸²

The recalibration of loyalties set in again. Weariness, anxiety, and increasingly embittered political quarrels eroded the alliance between the “leftist” shaykhs and the YSP. Ṣāliḥ deliberately intensified the collective psychosis of fear. The death threats and assassinations had made plain that the YSP was incapable of keeping its allies from being killed (nor could it protect itself, for the YSP had lost more than 100 party members through assassinations). The southern “what-if” scenarios in the secession debate profoundly disquieted those shaykhs who had allied themselves with the YSP in a political marriage of convenience on the assumption that they would gain a strong domestic partner who would support them in their bickering with Sanaa. Now they felt both pity and anger. Pity because unity had meant a lot to the Yemeni people. And anger because they had trusted in the YSP’s support. How disheartening to see that eventually they had been let down by their retreating southern ally! The secession debate antagonized the “leftist” shaykhs, and with them thousands of their men at arms, who should have been the backbone of southern influence and military might in the northern territories.

Everywhere threats and intimidation had their due effect on the faint-hearted and the undecided. Those who had been fully determined to support Aden for the most part became uneasy and disunited under the formidable pressure of the Ṣāliḥ regime. Not for the first time in Yemeni history, the shaykhs’ unreliable nature became manifest. The shaykhs sought tribal greatness, but did not want to take on imponderable risks. They wanted arms but not war, YSP support but not YSP ideology. With the storm clouds of civil war looming on the horizon, the wind veered them away from their apparent convictions and left them in another place. But not all of them had the freedom of choice. Some clung to the alliance with Aden because they had no other choice. Mujāhid, for his part, was so deeply involved in the conflict with the

82 Carapico 1996: 297; Carapico 1998: 185–186; and Nāṣir 2015: 104.

northern regime that Aden's support had become indispensable for him. What had begun as a partnership and strategic alliance between him and al-Bīḍ in a political environment of more or less equitable coalitions and balanced powers, had become the last lifeline that could rescue him from great peril.

The Time of Faits Accomplis (1993–94)

للضرورة احكامها وظروفها

Necessity has its own rules and conditions



Any external observer looking at the political history of unified Yemen would agree that the 1993 parliamentary elections were one of its brightest chapters, just as the 1994 civil war was one of its most sombre. Yemen's experiment in pluralism during the transition period from 1990 to 1993 remains unparalleled in the history of the Arabian Peninsula, for it seemed to suggest that the Yemeni sister states had shaken off their troublesome pasts and, in a joint effort, catapulted themselves from the age of Cold War confrontations, particularism, and one-party rule into that of sisterhood, unity, and democracy. Against this background, the 1994 civil war appeared like an atavism, a relapse into a dark past that was characterized by separation and deep-seated resentments.

Seen from another angle, it could also be argued that in the sequence of events that began in 1990, the parliamentary elections were only a temporary delay that (similar to the moment of retardation in a classical Greek tragedy) momentarily halted a fatal escalation, in a way that still suggested the possibility of a different outcome. Like in a Greek tragedy, however, this hope was bound to be disappointed. The North and South were heading towards civil war with ominous inevitability, and the elections only delayed their path into the abyss.

Anyone looking at the interior workings of this process would agree that the elections, despite a few minor surprises and unexpected events, were not expressions of genuine competition. Its results could have been predicted from the very day of unification. Northern dominance in united Yemen was the outcome of simple arithmetic: since the concept of democracy is based on the will of the majority, the YSP's electoral defeat simply reflected the demographic fact that after unity the southerners had become a minority, amounting to about 20 per cent of the total population. Democracy had disadvantaged the South and the YSP, and they had badly miscalculated the effects of pluralist competition

for political power. Since the very day of unification, northern dominance had been a *fait accompli*.

For the same demographic reason, and in spite of the desperate efforts of the southern forces, the outcome of the civil war was inevitable, and the northern victory imposed further brutal and irrefutable realities. With his double victory – electoral and military – Ṣāliḥ took full power and implemented a good part of his autocratic policies by exploiting and corrupting the existing democratic system from within – a classic method of autocrats and dictators. Even though he played his part as president of a united, “democratic” Yemen with skill, he could not hide the fact that competition and power sharing were contrary to his inclinations. Once his position at the helm of a united Yemen was cemented, he returned to his earlier erratic, autocratic system of governance. In many ways the post-war situation suited his yearning for non-political politics, and the sham democracy that he introduced into Yemen was in fact the end of open competition and genuine pluralism.

The consequences of the renunciation of politics were soon felt. After taking power, control over the “united Yemen” was exercised by Ṣāliḥ, his extended clan, and those who had supported him in the elections and the civil war. These included ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, who stood firmly on Ṣāliḥ’s side during the war and for this reason even fell out (at least temporarily) with his Saudi patrons who had actively supported the southern secessionists to counterbalance the growing power potential of a united Yemen.¹ In the 1993 elections, the Iṣlāḥ party did well, and in the 1994 civil war Iṣlāḥ’s Islamist warriors, directed by al-Aḥmar, were instrumental in the subjugation and humiliation of the South. In this way the Islamists, who had been lurking in the shadows at least since the War of the Central Areas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, finally emerged from the darkness and took the spotlight of this national drama to become central actors.

The present chapter follows Mujāhid, whose unwavering support for al-Bīḍ (which was more an expression of his antagonism towards Ṣāliḥ than enthusiasm for al-Bīḍ) seemed to become increasingly disconnected from the political environment, for shaykhly loyalties were rather fluid and subject to incessant

1 In 1994, Saudi support for southern secessionists led to a severe crisis between Sanaa and Riyadh. Since ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar sided with President Ṣāliḥ, his relationship with the Saudis temporarily deteriorated, see Dresch 1995: 39. For the Saudi position in 1994, see also Burrowes 1995: 73–77; Katz 1995: 82–85; and Dresch 2000: 196. Khayrullah (2016: 140–143) argues that there was always a line of communication between al-Aḥmar and Ṣāliḥ; al-Aḥmar did not allow this connection to be severed, despite the often intense differences and rivalries between them.

adjustments and recalibrations. While Mujāhid obstinately maintained his alliance with Aden, those shaykhs who had sympathized with the southern cause during the transition period adjusted to the changing power balance that inclined in the direction of Ṣāliḥ. Perhaps Aden might have prevailed against Sanaa in the war if al-Biḍ had garnered and maintained the support of a substantial part of disaffected northern shaykhs and tribes. For many in the North shared “southern” grievances, and the transition period from 1990 to 1993 showed that many long-standing relationships with Aden, originally formed in the NDF network were still in operation. Yet both sides missed a golden opportunity to close ranks. Aden, through its unclear manoeuvring and secessionist talk, annoyed sympathetic northern tribes. And the northern shaykhs, as soon as their loyalty was put to the test, turned out to be unreliable allies; their notorious penchant for venality and “treachery” arose, however, mostly from a sober consideration of costs and benefits. As a result, and in spite of their better judgement, al-Biḍ and the northern shaykhs united, only to be deserted by the other in the eleventh hour.

Throughout this time, from 1990 to 1993, Mujāhid’s personal biography remained closely linked to the political history of Yemen. This chapter enquires into some of Mujāhid’s most ill-fated projects, endeavours, and experiences: his aborted candidacy for parliament, the military defeat of his tribe at the outset of the 1994 civil war, the siege and fall of Aden, al-Biḍ’s revocation of their alliance, and his catastrophic third encounter with Ṣāliḥ. This succession of disasters and milestones on the way to failure put him on the defensive on all fronts. At length, shaken by this succession of blows, and in greater peril than ever before, even endangering those around him, he chose to end the struggle and fruitless exertions that had characterized his shaykhdom. His resolve to leave Yemen and go into exile was as much an admission of failure, a reaction to the enormous tension and disappointed hopes, as it was the result of his overconfidence in his own strength.

1 “Something Wonderful Has Happened in Yemen” (1993)

The whole world seemed to be looking at Yemen when the country’s first parliamentary elections were held on 27 April 1993. On this occasion, the *New York Times* headline read “Something wonderful has happened in Yemen,” expressing wonder and enthusiasm about the end of the Cold War and its aberrations in South Arabia and the peaceful transformation of two one-party regimes that had been at loggerheads with each other for almost a quarter of a century, into

the only democracy in the Arabian Peninsula – a process that was indeed in many ways unique.²

Inspired by the political optimism and the grassroots activism of the transition period from 1990 to 1993, thousands of candidates and more than forty parties contested for 301 constituency-based parliamentary seats. On this occasion, the parties sought to represent themselves in the best possible light. The GPC's electoral programme, vaguely presented as broad and multidirectional, reflected liberal and democratic convictions. The YSP presented itself as a social-democratic party and the champion of democracy, modernization, and order, and as anti-corruption. The Iṣlāḥ party slogan "The Quran and the Sunna supersede the constitution and the law" promoted the central role of Islam in all areas of life and politics, including the constitution. Scores of smaller parties, such as al-Ḥaqq (representing the interests of the Zaydis and the *sāda*), Baathists, and Nasserists vied for the favour of the voters. Despite the multitude of parties, three-quarters of the contenders stood for the elections as "independent" candidates; however, after the elections, many of these "independents" turned out to have been stooges of the GPC or the other large parties who, with this ruse, managed to double and triple the number of their candidates.³

One of these independent candidates was Mujāhid Ḥaydar. In the run-up phase of the elections, and despite the discouraging events of the recent years (the military campaigns that targeted him and his tribe, the thwarted Talāḥum party project, the futile efforts to unite the Bakil and mobilize them against the northern regime, the death threats and attempts on his life), he once again gathered his forces and prepared to run for constituency number 280, Ḥarf Sufyān. He decided to run as an independent candidate because he still clung to the project of the Talāḥum party and viewed himself as an ally, not a member, of the YSP.

² *New York Times*, 8 May 1993, p. 20.

³ For the 1993 election programmes and party representatives, see Detalle 1993: 8–9; Carapico 1993a; Carapico 1993b; Carapico 1998: 140–151; Glosemeyer 2001: 83–94; Day 2012: 117–122; and Brandt 2017a: 118–127. The large number of independent candidates has since become a general pattern in Yemen electoral politics. In considering the 2003 parliamentary elections, Longley Alley (2007: 249–250) explains that the GPC's effective use of local and popular figures was matched by their respect for local traditions and norms. When party organizers found, for example, that any person (a sayyid, or a lesser shaykh) was more popular than the area's senior shaykh, they would sometimes allow the senior shaykh to run on the GPC ticket, while encouraging the other candidate to run as an independent. The other candidate would then promise to switch to the GPC after winning the election.

In Aden, the prospect of Mujāhid Ḥaydar running for parliament in the Ḥarf Sufyān constituency caused a stir. When the news of Mujāhid's candidacy reached him, al-Biḍ expressed alarm, then grave concern. Mujāhid was Aden's loyal ally, that much was clear. Likewise, it was clear that Mujāhid, supported by the strong oppositional underground movement in Sufyān, would in all likelihood win the parliament seat. Yet in Sufyān, in particular, al-Biḍ did not want an independent candidate, but a true socialist candidate who would bring the prevailing strong anti-Sanaa sentiments among the people over to the YSP. And there were further concerns, as the socialists in Aden were not pleased with the violence they believed Mujāhid and his tribesmen would bring into the political realm. Once the YSP leaders came to recognize the ardent and overwhelming will that motivated all of Mujāhid's actions, they became even more hesitant to openly side with him unless they were urgently in need of his help. They knew very well that the element of passion, the very motor behind Mujāhid's activities, would inevitably lead to problems once he entered parliament.

I decided to run for parliament as an independent candidate, because ultimately the Talāḥum party did not get al-Biḍ's support. And ideologically, I was no socialist. Yet, as the proverb goes, "the enemy of the enemy is a friend" (*'aduww al-'aduww ṣadiq*).

In the run-up to the elections, people from al-Biḍ's office sought me out and told me that al-Biḍ wanted me to come and meet him in Aden. I went to Aden, and there he said to me, "I invited you because I want to ask you not to run for parliament." I asked him for the reasons, and he told me, "Your opponent 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar will run for parliament in his constituency [Khamir], and you would meet him in parliament, and you would fall out with him, and they would exploit this against us because you are considered one of us." He continued, "We have many charges against Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar, and they do not have anything against us, not a single point, and any problem you cause with al-Aḥmar when you meet him in parliament will be used against us." He asked me to identify a person from the Sufyān who would run for the YSP in my stead, and to mobilize the Sufyān to elect this person. I balked at his request, but he kept me in Qaṣr al-Ma'āshīq [the presidential palace in Crater] for two days until he had persuaded me and compensated me with other things: expensive real estate in Aden, heavy and medium weapons, and money.

Indeed, there was hardly a man in highland Yemen who would be less welcome in parliament than Mujāhid. The effect of the physical presence of his

hereditary foe ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar or his sons in parliament could easily be imagined: a wrong word, a look, an ill-timed jest, an unexpected personal encounter – any one of these events would have been sufficient to provoke Mujāhid’s temper and desire for revenge. For this reason, the YSP leadership asked him to restrain his activities and abandon his plans to run for parliament. Eventually al-Biḍ’s friendly counsel (or urgent orders) kept Mujāhid from running. By promising him compensation, Mujāhid was persuaded, with reservations, to abandon his plans to run for election. He was too much of an activist to be content with the sinecures offered by al-Biḍ, but he understood that he was standing alone against the northern regime, and that he needed al-Biḍ’s support in order to prevail.

Al-Biḍ’s request put me in a quandary, but eventually I gave in. I was keen not to lose him, because he protected me in confrontations with my opponents, Šāliḥ and al-Aḥmar. At length, I suggested the candidacy of Muḥammad Mušliḥ al-Shahwānī [from Sufyān], who was a YSP man and heir to Shaykh Mušliḥ al-Shahwānī.⁴ After the death of my brother Ḥaydar [in 1982], Mušliḥ al-Shahwānī had succeeded him and became the NDF field commander in Ḥarf Sufyān in his stead, may God have mercy on them. Our families were very close, always on the same side. We mobilized the Sufyān to elect Muḥammad al-Shahwānī, and he won the parliamentary seat for the YSP. It was the only seat the YSP won in the far north. [After the elections] al-Biḍ again asked me to meet him in Aden, where he thanked me profusely. I recall that [the southern politician] Jārallāh ‘Umar told me, “Our success in the Sufyān constituency is equal to ten other constituencies. It is our only bridgehead [into the north].”

In fact, in ‘Amrān’s Ḍulayma Ḥabūr constituency (ironically the home constituency of Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar), the YSP had done well, and YSP candidate ‘Alī Ṣaghīr Jamīl asserted himself against Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar, who ran for the Iṣlāḥ party. Yet the course of the elections took an unexpected turn when Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar’s escorts removed the ballot boxes at gunpoint and the ensuing quarrel escalated into the destruction, by rocket-launcher, of the YSP headquarters in Ḥabūr. Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar declared himself the winner of the election.⁵

4 In 1980, when Mušliḥ al-Shahwānī of the Sufyān took revenge from a Ḥāshid shaykh for the death of one of his tribesmen, the incident became the starting point of the process that developed into the blood feud between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar, see chapter 2.

5 On the Ḥabūr incident see, for example, Detalle 1993: 11; Carapico 1998: 144; and Dresch 2000: 194. On ‘Alī Ṣaghīr Jamīl’s assassination, see the interview with his son (*Yemenat*, 25

After the votes had been counted, the results merely confirmed the status quo; that is, each party won almost absolute control over their respective territories of former South and North Yemen. The GPC had won majorities in all the northern governorates, plus three seats in the South. The YSP triumphed in the South and also did well in Lower Yemen – Ta‘iz, Ibb, and al-Bayḍā’ – areas that have a historical affinity to the South. In Khamir, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar won for the Iṣlāḥ party; out of deference, the GPC and YSP had not run against him in his home constituency.⁶ Despite the nationwide nomination of dozens of candidates, only two al-Ḥaqq party candidates were successful, both in Ṣa‘da province, one of whom was a certain Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī. Ironically, in the 1990s Ṣāliḥ and the GPC establishment were exclusively focused on the YSP and Iṣlāḥ party, not having the ghost of a notion that in fact, the inconspicuous success of an al-Ḥaqq party candidate was the first public manifestation of the dreaded revolt that would devour them, and the whole country with them, two decades later. The electoral success of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in the remote mountains of Marrān was the true herald of revolution.⁷

The GPC emerged as the largest party with a total of 122 parliamentary seats, falling short of an absolute majority. The Iṣlāḥ party was a surprise success and won 62 seats. The YSP won only 56 seats. A coalition of GPC, YSP, and Iṣlāḥ was formed, in which GPC and Iṣlāḥ, by applying the percentage of their votes, refused to allocate more than one of the presidential council’s five seats to the YSP (previously the YSP had held two).⁸ The YSP had badly miscalculated the effects of a pluralist competition for political power. The YSP could count on its long-standing northern connections through the old NDF network, and the YSP’s grievances against Sanaa were shared by many in the North, but this did not suffice to mobilize a significant proportion of northern voters for the YSP and maintain a strong position in the presidential council.

In Sufyān, however, the YSP’s electoral success was an accomplished and irrefutable fact that epitomized the oppositional spirit among the Bakīl in ‘Amrān and the durability of the clandestine cooperation between Sufyān and Aden. Mujaḥid, who had been instrumental in the nomination and support of Sufyān’s YSP candidate, considered Muḥammad al-Shahwānī’s electoral victory as his personal achievement. As soon as parliament commenced its work,

November 2013). Like Aḥmad Ḥaydar, ‘Alī Ṣaghīr Jamīl was assassinated in al-Rawḍa neighbourhood in Sanaa in 1995.

6 Detalle 1993: 11.

7 On al-Ḥaqq’s electoral success in Ṣa‘da province, see Brandt 2017a: 118–131.

8 Day 2012: 122.

he set out to demonstrate that he was undoubtedly, even if by proxy, in parliament as the man behind Muḥammad al-Shahwānī.

On the day of parliament's opening session, I provided Muḥammad al-Shahwānī with my car and a group of my tribal guards, and they entered the parliament compound in Sanaa along with Muḥammad al-Shahwānī's own guards and car. When 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's guards saw them entering and parking my car next to al-Aḥmar's car, they raised the barrels of their guns and pointed them at my men. This greatly angered my men, who responded by hitting al-Aḥmar's car with the butts of their guns, leading to scuffles between them. The situation was only relieved when the guards of Prime Minister Ḥaydar Abū Bakr al-'Aṭṭās appeared on the scene and managed to separate them.

2 The Wrong War (1994)

The results of the elections and the dispute over the seat distribution in the presidential council led to a further deterioration of the situation. The YSP leaders were convinced of the bad faith and aggressive intentions of Ṣāliḥ and the Iṣlāḥ party, and their view that the northern regime was waging a campaign against them was confirmed. An undeclared war was being carried out by political machination, intimidation, and assassinations, and thus the YSP leaders began to speak openly of federation.⁹

By contrast, the GPC and Iṣlāḥ leaders believed that they had accommodated the YSP sufficiently, and allowed it a far greater voice and share in the government than its demographic weight (20/80) justified. In the southern federation plans the North saw nothing but a distraction to undermine Yemeni unity, a first step towards secession; they suspected that al-Biḍ's meetings with foreign powers – Saudi Arabia and the United States – were a conspiracy to divide a united Yemen. Eventually the conflict within the governing coalition prompted al-Biḍ to leave Sanaa for Aden in January 1994. Neither domestic nor foreign attempts at mediation, including a broad national dialogue aimed at a comprehensive resolution of the underlying conflict, could persuade him to return to Sanaa and cooperate with Ṣāliḥ.¹⁰

9 For a summary of post-election developments, see Day 2012: 122–128.

10 On the National Dialogue, see Carapico 1998: 176–180; and Day 2012: 126–128. Sinān Abū Laḥūm's memoirs (2004: vol. 4: 135–137) contain a particularly meticulous description of

Further signs suggested that the days of negotiation and exchanges of proposals were over, that the last round in the struggle between North and South had begun, and that a trial of strength by way of arms had become unavoidable. Nowhere was the atmosphere of exhaustion and sense of resignation with the failure of the political process as palpable as in the intense struggle over control of the armed forces. In violation of the provisions of the 1990 Sanaa Accord, a merger of the northern and the southern armies had never taken place, and the respective army apparatuses had remained in the hands of their former states. The southern minister of defence, Haythām Qāsim Ṭāhir, was excluded from decision-making processes in the North. The YSP had demanded unification of the armies, which would have given Ṭāhir more effective control, but the GPC was determined to prevent the YSP from gaining ground.¹¹ After the 1993 elections, the North and South began to reinforce, realign, and relocate their respective troops, as acts of sabotage increased, and the armed forces along the former border were put on alert.

After unity, the former states each worked to weaken the other by placing army units in the territory of the other state. Thus, the southern army moved several brigades to the North: The Fifth Brigade was shifted to Sufyān's Jabal Aswad, the Third Brigade went to 'Amrān city, the Ba' Ṣuhayb Brigade went to Dhamār, the Fourteenth October Brigade went to Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, the First Brigade went to Yarīm, and some smaller units were sent to Ṣa'da, al-Jawf, and the Tihāma lowlands.¹² Only two northern brigades were placed in the former South: the Second Brigade near Ḥabīlayn was located at the arterial highway that ran from Lahj to al-Ḍālī', and the 'Amāliqa ("Giants") Brigade was sent to Abyan.¹³ Yet whereas the southern brigades in the North did not occupy positions of much strategic importance, the northern Second Brigade and the 'Amāliqa were ideally positioned to enable a massive strategic thrust from the

the process of alienation that took place between the North and South, including the numerous domestic and foreign initiatives and attempts at mediation.

11 On the difficulties surrounding the merger of the armed forces, see Hudson 1995: 25; Warburton 1995: 23–24; Kostiner 1996: 28. Warburton (1995: 23–24) considers the failed merger in part a "dialectical problem, as the only *raison d'être* of the armed forces of either former state was to threaten the other."

12 Warburton 1995: 24.

13 The 'Amāliqa is an elite, non-tribal brigade of the armed forces, established in the early 1970s by former President Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī. Placed under the command of his brother, 'Abdallāh, until their violent deaths in 1978, al-Ḥamdī used the 'Amāliqa to strengthen his position against the regular and irregular units dominated by the tribes and to gain and maintain control of the YAR during and after the 1974 coup, see Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 209.

North towards Aden and Ḥaḍramawt. Moreover, most southern brigades in the North were garrisoned along with northern brigades in the same camps, hence the southern units in Sufyān, ‘Amrān, and Dhamār faced northern units of nearly equal strength. By contrast, the northern Second Brigade and the ‘Amāliqa in the South had free rein. Finally, the southern brigades were pervaded by divisions and conflicts of loyalty; some were loyal to (unionist, pro-North) ‘Alī Nāṣir, some to the (federalist, then secessionist) YSP, and others to the (unionist, pro-South) NDF. Needless to say, all of the southern brigades were infiltrated by Ṣāliḥ’s loyalists.¹⁴

Since 1990, and particularly after the 1993 elections, the YSP had tried to mobilize disaffected elements among the northern tribes to join the southern cause. The southern leaders had strategically placed major southern forces in the northern highlands – the Fifth Brigade at Sufyān’s Jabal Aswad, the Third Brigade at ‘Amrān city, the Fourteenth October Brigade at Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl – in areas where clandestine underground communication between the Bakīl and Aden were still in place and where southern soldiers would be able to withdraw into the surrounding tribal areas if needed. Even if many disaffected Bakīl tribes were no longer as proactive vis-à-vis the YSP as in the first days of unity, the southern leaders hoped for friendly or at least neutral tribal environments.¹⁵

Certainly nowhere were the ties between southern army units and the surrounding tribes as old and close as in Sufyān, where the Fifth Brigade was garrisoned at Jabal Aswad after it came along with ‘Alī Nāṣir to the North in 1986. By 1994, the garrison at Sufyān’s Jabal Aswad was composed of the southern Fifth Brigade and a northern battalion (*katība*), the latter stationed in an elevated place (*qarn*) towering over the Fifth Brigade’s camp. This battalion, which belonged to ‘Alī Muḥsin’s Firqa, consisted of radical Sunni Islamists, most of Ḥāshid origin (the battalion’s commander himself was from al-‘Uṣaymāt). The fact that since its flight to the North in 1986 the Fifth Brigade had no heavy weapons and was “supervised” by a northern Islamist battalion is an indication of ‘Alī Muḥsin’s concerns about the brigade’s political orientation.

In mid-February 1994, in a last but futile attempt to find a constructive solution to the crisis, the collective leadership of Yemen signed the Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA) in Amman, Jordan.¹⁶ At the same time, limited

14 Personal communication with Noel Brehony, February 2019.

15 Warburton 1995: 24, 26; Dunbar 1995: 63–64; Whitaker 1997: 25; and Bin Aḥmad 2017.

16 The Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA) was an outcome of the national dialogue process. It favoured federalism, the form of government preferred by the South. The North, by contrast, favoured the Constitution, which provided for national unity, a fact that would

military confrontations flared up in Abyan and several other areas, but were contained thanks to de-escalation measures. However, underlying tensions continued unabated, and the situation of the southern army units in the North deteriorated by the day. Shortly after the signing of the DPA on 27 February, the situation in Sufyān exploded.¹⁷

In 1986, ‘Alī Muḥsin had integrated the Fifth Brigade into the Firqa and garrisoned it at Sufyān’s Jabal Aswad. Since the Fifth Brigade had come with ‘Alī Nāṣir to the North, ‘Alī Muḥsin assumed that the brigade was sympathetic to the regime in Sanaa and hence hostile towards us, the Sufyān. In the years to come, however, when the soldiers began to feel the bigotry and tyranny of ‘Alī Muḥsin, they started leaning towards us, the tribe of Sufyān, because it was known that we were opposed to him.

In September 1993, Aden replaced the Fifth Brigade’s commander with YSP-loyalist ‘Abdallāh Shalīl.¹⁸ Shalīl knew about my hostility to Ṣāliḥ, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, and ‘Alī Muḥsin, and about my close relationship with the YSP. He visited me in [my home village] Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a and asked me to go to Aden and coordinate for him with [the southern] minister of defence, Haythām Qāsim Ṭāhir. I went to Aden, and during my absence ‘Alī Muḥsin appointed a new commander to the Fifth Brigade, [Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad] Ṭaymas, to replace Shalīl.¹⁹ Shalīl disobeyed ‘Alī Muḥsin’s orders to hand over the command of the Fifth Brigade to Ṭaymas, and flatly refused Ṭaymas entry to the brigade’s camp. Ṭaymas returned to Sanaa and told ‘Alī Muḥsin that ‘Abdallāh Shalīl had refused to implement the order, and shortly after the war broke out [at Jabal Aswad] when I was still in Aden.

‘Alī Muḥsin’s forces and the *ikhwanjī* [Islamist] Ḥāshid battalion that was also stationed at Jabal Aswad attacked the Fifth Brigade with heavy artillery. Since the Fifth Brigade had no heavy weapons, the minister of

also facilitate northern access to the oil fields in Ḥaḍramawt, see Day 2012: 126–128; and Khayrullah 2016: 75.

- 17 For the battle at Sufyān’s Jabal Aswad, see Warburton 1995: 26. Mujāhid’s narrative gives a more detailed version that explains why the Fifth Brigade, which was considered loyal to ‘Alī Nāṣir and hence representing northern interests, turned against the North at the very outset of the civil war. For a version in conformity with Mujāhid’s narrative, see Nāṣir 2015: 140–141.
- 18 Shalīl had been a loyalist of ‘Alī Nāṣir, but supported al-Biḍ in the YSP power struggle of 1986, see Dresch 2000: 195; and Day 2012: 134.
- 19 In 1986, Ṭaymas joined ‘Alī Nāṣir’s flight to the North, where he continued his military career in ‘Alī Muḥsin’s Firqa.

defence, Haythām Qāsim Ṭāhir, urged me to summon my tribe to fight alongside the Fifth Brigade, which I did, and we supported it with our tribesmen and matériel from our own arsenal: B-10 recoilless rifles and RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Over the course of the night, we managed to achieve victory over the Firqā and the Islamists.

The next morning, however, army reinforcements in plain clothes arrived from Ṣa'da on public buses, pretending that they were civilian travellers on their way to Sanaa. We were caught by surprise when suddenly they opened fire on us from the front and rear, and we were in the middle of the battle. When it was over, ten of my tribesmen and a number of soldiers of the Fifth Brigade were dead or dying, and many others had been wounded.²⁰ The war continued, until dawn of the second day, when the commander of the Fifth Brigade announced that they had run out of ammunition. He and many of his soldiers managed to withdraw into the surrounding tribal areas of Sufyān. The minister of defence asked me to secure their evacuation to Aden, and I instructed my tribesmen, headed by Shaykh Nāji Ḥirshān, to escort them from Sufyān to al-'Abla in al-Jawf and from there to al-'Abr border crossing point in Ḥaḍramawt, and then, via Abyan, to Aden.

How did you communicate with your tribesmen?

I spent two days stuck to the telephone in Aden and communicated with my tribe through the central telephone that belonged to Ḥarf Sufyān district, in the main communications centre where a landline telephone was run by someone from the city of al-Ḥarf. We called him always, for any matter, and told him, "Move your jeep and bring the 'āqil so-and-so to the call centre, so we can talk to him." I was in a kind of overdrive, talking to my men, gathering information, following-up on the battle; all the time coordinating between my tribe, the Fifth Brigade, and the southern leadership in Aden.

'Abdallāh Shalīl and the southern soldiers managed to withdraw into the Bakīlī hinterlands from where they "miraculously passed out to the South," as a local newspaper termed it.²¹ It was a kind of triumph when Shalīl, accompanied by surviving soldiers and their Sufyānī escorts, arrived safe and unscathed in Aden; yet it was a triumph that left Mujāhid and the southern leaders who went to receive them with a stale aftertaste. Shalīl's survival could not conceal

20 Dresch (2000: 195) estimates the number of casualties in this battle at approximately 20–30 people.

21 Bin Aḥmad 2017.

the fact that the Fifth Brigade, along with the tribe of Sufyān, had suffered a painful defeat. It was a dark day that forebode even darker days; a bad omen for the coming war.

When I asked why, in these fateful days, when his tribe was in distress and Sufyān was in furious turmoil, he did not return from Aden and take matters into his own hands with his usual energy, Mujāhid's answers were unusually evasive. In retrospect, his atypical lack of action and lingering in Aden suggests that, for the first time, he might have been haunted by doubts, by an unspoken, uncomfortable premonition that he did not yet want to admit to himself; namely, that his return to Sufyān would worsen rather than improve the situation for his tribe. 'Alī Muḥsin and the northern army had defeated the Sufyān and would not hesitate to further harm the tribe and prove the supremacy of the northern regime. Now northern supremacy was a *fait accompli*, and little could be done about it.

Indeed, the Fifth Brigade's defeat in Sufyān proved to be only the first step towards the eradication of the remaining southern units stationed in the North. Having delivered this vigorous blow to the Sufyān, the civil war was paused for a short while; this interlude that only emphasized the cruelty of the looming southern defeat. Tensions continued to soar, and after a short lull, on 27 April 1994 – the anniversary of the 1993 parliamentary elections, and exactly two months after the Sufyān battle – Ṣāliḥ gave an inflammatory speech, in which he accused the YSP of fomenting division; the South took this to be a declaration of war, which it undoubtedly was. Within hours after Ṣāliḥ's speech, clashes erupted anew, between the southern Third Brigade and the northern First Brigade stationed at the same garrison in 'Amrān city. In this way the civil war resumed in full force, from dangerous words and undue stimulation of national passions.

The confrontation between the southern Third Brigade and the northern First Brigade at 'Amrān developed into an extremely brutal three-day battle, in which both brigades stationed at the same camp aimed their tanks at each other. Due to the concentration of matériel in a position that restricted mobility, an estimated 70 to 200 men lost their lives in this battle and an enormous amount of southern equipment was destroyed.²² Again, the Sufyān were instrumental in securing the flight of the southern soldiers who managed to escape the carnage.

22 Supposedly, about 80 tanks were lost in the 'Amrān battle, of which two-thirds may have been southern. For further details, see Warburton 1995: 26–27; al-Bakr 1995; Dresch 2000: 196; and Nāṣir 2015: 141.

After a brief period, the battle moved to the southern Third Brigade led by Sayf al-Baqrī and ‘Alī Muḥsin’s First Brigade in ‘Amrān city. This was the hardest battle, 130 tanks aimed their barrels at each other and fought at point-blank range inside the confined space of the garrison; the Third Brigade was destroyed and nearly annihilated in a terrible manner. After the Third Brigade’s defeat, tribesmen from al-Ghūla and ‘Iyāl Surayḥ [of Bakīl] managed to evacuate the southern commander, Sayf al-Baqrī, and other survivors to Sufyān, where our tribesmen took over and brought them down to Aden.²³

The ‘Amrān battle signalled the beginning of fateful events in the annals of Yemeni history; yet in one contemporary document it left scarcely a trace, namely the memoirs penned by ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. In his typical way of glossing over critical situations, he dismisses the battle (or rather massacre) of ‘Amrān, though the death toll was greater than that of Yemen’s 1972 and 1979 border wars combined, as “some problems” (*ba‘d al-ishkāliyyāt*). Al-Aḥmar nevertheless elaborates on why, in his opinion, the cooperation between the southern leadership and the Bakīl was bound to fail: the Bakīl had promised to support the southern leaders in Aden – by rallying their tribesmen to the southern cause, blocking roads, and laying siege on Sanaa, so that the war would take place in the northern capital rather than in Aden – yet in their hour of need the Bakīl did not meet their promises and “let them down” (*khadhālū-hum*).²⁴

Indeed, most northern tribes, whose support Aden had sought since unification, were of no help to the South in the civil war. Once again, the YSP was confronted by the way in which tribal leaders shifted with the changing wind. When the civil war erupted, many of the northern shaykhs who had leaned towards the YSP during the post-1990 transition phase, had already re-aligned themselves with those in power. The secession debate had antagonized them.

23 Warburton (1995: 26) speaks of “fearing a massacre, Southern troops abandoned their heavy equipment and withdrew into previously prepared fortifications in the Bakil, where they were safe.” Mujāhid’s account corresponds with Day (2012: 131), who writes that during the ‘Amrān battle “southern commanders tried to bring Bakil tribal militias into their compound as a protection force. They hoped that northern Hashid shaykhs would prevent any military actions that could spark an intertribal war. However, the northern troops denied the Bakil tribesmen access to the southern camp. Soon afterward southern troops became pinned down by northern artillery barrages from strategic high ground surrounding the camp. During intense, close range shelling, hundreds of southern soldiers were massacred ... the remnants of the southern brigades at Amran retreated under the protection of Bakil tribesmen.”

24 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 279–283. For a similar view, cf. Dunbar 1995: 63–64.

In their eyes, the YSP was an unreliable ally, for whom they would not go to war and sacrifice their tribesmen. Many northern tribal leaders were greatly annoyed by Aden's unclear politics, clumsy manoeuvring, and its contradictory and hypocritical attitude towards the northern tribes. Aden's positions frequently oscillated between secret wooing and public contempt, and finally (from a tribal point of view) they were offended by the undignified defensive posture of al-Biḍ, who remained in retreat in Aden. When the civil war broke out, their lack of support for southern forces made it clear that they would not help in a cause they knew to be lost.

The southern leadership in Aden had itself to blame for the lack of enthusiasm of its erstwhile tribal allies. Yet there were also indications that Ṣāliḥ had manipulated the situation. Al-Biḍ knew full well that Ṣāliḥ was a master of underground intrigue, and before long he knew this from personal experience. Ṣāliḥ had prepared, in meticulous detail, to take over the united country, and since the Talāḥum Conference he had considered all eventualities. The civil war made it clear that many of al-Biḍ's shaykhly friends were in truth allies of Ṣāliḥ, and had treacherously deceived their way into al-Biḍ's confidence. These shaykhs, though often men of exceptional talent, could be bought on easy terms.

[After unity,] some shaykhs came out [outwardly] in opposition to Ṣāliḥ [while secretly] they were in league with him. Ṣāliḥ wanted al-Biḍ to invest his financial and military resources in these shaykhs, to make sure that al-Biḍ's resources would not harm him and that the war would take place in Aden rather than in Sanaa, because these resources went into the hands of the shaykhs who were Ṣāliḥ loyalists, and not into our hands – the hands of those who were Ṣāliḥ's real enemies. The Ṣāliḥ loyalists took al-Biḍ's resources, but did not use them against Ṣāliḥ. There was a collusion between those shaykhs and Ṣāliḥ. Ṣāliḥ told them, "Between me and al-Biḍ is a disagreement. Al-Biḍ has financial and military resources that he could give to our true opponents, and as a result, the war will take place here, in Sanaa. I want you to come out in opposition against me; tell all and sundry how much you loathe me and give al-Biḍ every reason to trust in you, to invite you [to Aden] and invest his resources in you – and then you ensure that they will not be used against us!"²⁵

25 Similar activities seem to have taken place during the War of the Central Areas in 1980–81. In a diary entry, Sinān Abū Laḥūm notes that some northern shaykhs joined the NDF nominally, in order to gain access to southern money and weapons, yet they did not intend to use them against Sanaa, see Abū Laḥūm 2004: vol. 3: 270.

After the elimination of the Third Brigade at ‘Amrān, the war moved on to the southern Ba’ Ṣuhayb Brigade led by Thābit Muthannā Jawās at Dhamār.²⁶ With air raids in Sanaa and Aden, the civil war began on a large scale. Once the northern army subdued the Ba’ Ṣuhayb Brigade, the way to Aden was open, and a three-pronged northern advance was set in motion, breaking through the former border. As northern forces slowly but steadily advanced on Aden, the southern tribes were of little help to the southern leaders. The ‘Awlaqī, the Yāfi‘, and the tribes of Radfān, whom the YSP had tried to reduce and detribalize in PDRY times and who loathed the YSP’s anti-tribal policies, chose a “neutral” position and put up only a nominal fight when the northern army passed through their territories. Likewise, al-Biḍ’s attempts to rally the tribes of Ḥaḍramawt produced little response.²⁷

From the outbreak of the civil war, Mujāhid had lingered in Aden, until he and his companions eventually joined the southern forces. In the battle for al-‘Anad airbase in Lahj, where two of the three northern prongs converged on their way to Aden, Mujāhid and his men faced the northern forces in battle.²⁸

We stayed with them [the southerners] and fought with them, as is our custom. We participated in the battle for al-‘Anad airbase with my tribesmen who had escorted ‘Abdallāh Shalil to Aden, plus those who had escorted Sayf al-Baqrī to Aden, plus my sixteen personal guards, in total seventy tribesmen from Sufyān. We fought alongside the southerners and helped them confront the northern forces, but our enthusiasm suffered a heavy blow when al-Biḍ declared southern secession [on 21 May 1994], because basically we were *waḥdawīyyūn* (unionists), not secessionists.

When southern resistance at al-‘Anad was about to break and the southern forces began to withdraw, we retreated with them, because I had decided not to sacrifice my tribesmen for the sake of southern secession. Since the days of the NDF, we were firm unionists, and the idea of paying for southern secession with the blood of my tribesmen was unacceptable to me.

During our retreat, we stumbled across an arms cache left behind by southern forces, [there were] RPG-7 grenade launchers and 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, and we decided to take our share of these arms. This

26 In 2004, during the first Ṣa‘da war between the Ṣāliḥ regime and the resurgent Ḥūthīs, Jawās was identified as the officer who shot Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in the caves of Jurf Salmān in Marrān, see Brandt 2017a: 382 n. 61.

27 Dresch 1995: 38.

28 For the al-‘Anad battle, see Warburton 1995: 31.

delayed us and [in the meantime] the northern reconnaissance arrived at the battlefield. Some of us confronted the northern vanguard in order to slow down its advance, while others continued to load weapons on our cars, then we left al-‘Anad.

There were clear signs that the southern forces had been infiltrated by traitors and [loyalists of] Ṣāliḥ and ‘Alī Muḥsin. On one occasion, southern forces laid a minefield behind the front, so in case of defeat, we would withdraw from the minefield through the safe corridor they left between the mines, which would explode only when the northern army came through. Yet when we withdrew from that place, we lost the safe corridor and were in desperate fear of the mines. But they did not explode. The soldiers who had laid the mines were traitors, they did not extract the arming pins, hence the mines were not armed and did not explode. We withdrew together with the southern forces to the city of al-Ḥawṭa, the capital of Laḥj, then to al-Ḥussaynī. As southern resistance became ever weaker, in the bottom of my heart I knew that the South was going to be defeated.

After the conquest of al-‘Anad air base, the northern forces continued their advance, forcing the southern army to the defensive on all fronts. By the beginning of July, Mujāhid and his companions were back in Aden. As the city was approached from all sides and the lines of the three-pronged northern advance slowly converged on Aden airport at Khormaksar, an eerie drama began to unfold. Exposed to massive shelling, parts of the city had become a landscape of craters, ruins, and rubble. Bombs had damaged many buildings, blasted out windows, and cut off water supplies to a population of nearly one million, all during the sweltering summer heat. Against a background rumble from heavy artillery, the sound of guns firing in the distance and fronts cracking everywhere, public order gradually dissolved, and the first looting took place. With their defeat at hand, the southern leaders, disappointed by their failure to gain either domestic support or international recognition, boarded ships and left Aden for al-Mukallā.

Mujāhid and his companions remained in Aden when the final assault on the besieged city began with heavy shelling. When al-Biḍ declared southern independence, it was clear to Mujāhid that he was fighting in the wrong war. Now, however, with the looming defeat of the southern state, it became clear to him that the end was near – not only the end of the southern project, but most likely also his own. Sufyān had been subdued, the northern forces stood at the gates of Aden, and even if he managed to escape the looming carnage, he knew that Ṣāliḥ had instructed the ‘Amāliqa Brigade to pursue and arrest him. As the

end came closer, it became clear to him that his decision in al-ʿAnad – that is, not to sacrifice the lives of his tribesmen for the sake of southern secession – would get him nowhere. It was evident that something far worse than southern secession was about to take place: the military subjection of the South and its retention in united Yemen, forever oppressed by the dominant North. In such a seemingly apocalyptic time, when everything was about to be torn into pieces, and amidst such terrible destruction, he revoked the decision he had made in al-ʿAnad.

I went to Haythām Qāsim Ṭāhir, the minister of defence, and Ṣāliḥ Munaṣṣir al-Siyaylī, the governor of Aden. I told them that Ṣāliḥ is fighting them together with Islamist warriors of the Iṣlāḥ party, and southerners who left the South together with President ʿAlī Nāṣir [in 1986]. And that they had not yet benefited from those oppressed northern tribes who despised Ṣāliḥ, al-Aḥmar, and the Islamists. I offered to head to the North and rally the tribes to fight alongside the South against Ṣāliḥ and asked them to open al-ʿAbr border crossing point in Ḥaḍramawt to let thousands of Bakīl warriors enter to fight alongside them. They supported my idea and told me to rush to al-Mukallā and convince al-Bīḍ of it. The plan was to go to Aden airport and board an Antonov military transport aircraft to al-Mukallā, because northern forces were already laying siege on Aden from three directions. The ʿAmāliqa stood in Abyan at the gates of Aden, shelling the city and the airport with Katyushas, and the land route to al-Mukallā was impassable.

Yet when we arrived at the airport, there were no planes. I asked the airport director about it and he told me, “We cannot hold any plane at the airport as a result of the shelling. You must be present when a plane arrives, because it cannot wait at the airport. I advise you to dig pits for you and your companions and seek shelter in them until a plane arrives. Get on board as quickly as possible because it won’t stop for more than a few minutes!” We dug pits to protect ourselves from splinters, because the airport building did not provide any protection against the airstrikes. The ʿAmāliqa was shelling the airport with Katyusha missiles, and we waited for one week in heaps of rubble, fragments of wall, and scattered rubbish for the arrival of a plane that would evacuate us from Aden.

One week in a pit?

Necessity has its own rules and conditions.

How is this, Katyusha shelling?

Scary, terrifying. The howling sound is freaking creepy. Like screaming death. The noise of hell.

The first plane that landed on the airport's runway was right away struck by a Katyusha missile and broke apart into halves. The shelling drove us back to the pit, and we kept waiting. At length, some days later, all of a sudden another plane arrived. It was a small military aircraft that seemed to come out of nowhere. The moment it landed, we ran across the tarmac and got aboard.

Were there others waiting for a plane?

Yes, there were some military leaders, and I think Dr Yāsīn Saʿīd [Nu'mān], but I am not certain. The plane took off again after a few minutes without gaining altitude, and flew for a while extremely low over the sea, it felt like one meter above the water surface, staying as low as possible to remain invisible [to radar] and lessen the chances of discovery and taking a hit. After a while it gained altitude, and finally we reached al-Mukallā. Shortly after we left Aden, the northern forces entered the city.

In al-Mukallā, I found the southern leaders in hopeless perplexity. I ran into a southern brigadier general and told him that I urgently needed to talk to al-Biḍ. He accommodated me in a hotel room to refresh myself – the past days had not exactly improved my already somewhat dishevelled appearance – and then went to inform al-Biḍ about my request.

In my meeting with al-Biḍ, I reiterated my proposal to rally the tribes of Bakīl and send them to the South. Yet in spite of strenuous efforts to gain al-Biḍ's approval, I was unable to obtain his consent. After being deceived by so many northern shaykhs, al-Biḍ was not convinced of my idea. He preserved a graceful, suave demeanour, but below the surface he seemed distressed and confused, as if he had lost confidence in the whole North except us, the Sufyān. He said, "No one is with us except you, the Sufyān, and I do not want to sacrifice you."

I looked at him in stupefaction. Then I understood that this man was profoundly scared. This was the voice of one who had been shaken to the depths. He was afraid of letting further northern tribes enter [the South], lest they, too, betray him and direct their weapons against the southerners.

And al-Biḍ was not all that wrong. While they were meeting in al-Mukallā, the northern army was launching its final assault on Aden, with furious shelling as they engaged the southern forces in a massive artillery duel at Aden airport. When the southern defenders began to vanish, northern forces along with tribal and Islamist irregulars, jihadis, and Arab-Afghan mujahideen entered Aden and moved into Crater, Ma'lā, and Tawāhī. Disastrous scenes took place as they began to loot the city, their violence and vandalism greatly supported

by the obscene hatred that had been created by years of anti-YSP Islamist propaganda. The pillage and destruction of Aden and the treatment of the Adenis by the northern invaders were outrageous and appalling, and can only be explained by the intoxicating feelings caused by uncontrolled violence, and by the systematic incitement and poisoning of public opinion that had been going on for years.

The northern excesses lasted ten days, during which “there was total disorder where you saw people looting and destroying everything.”²⁹ Although the first looting began when Aden was still under siege, in that summer 1994, it was seared in the collective southern memory that again, the northern tribes had descended from the highlands and swarmed toward the South, like locusts, to collect whatever booty they could find, in the process adding to the long-existing southern fears and historical angst about being overrun by the northern tribes.³⁰ Many at the time drew parallels with the 1948 sack of Sanaa.³¹

Two days after my meeting with al-Bīḍ, Ṣāliḥ Abū Bakr Bin Ḥussaynūn (the leader of the Ḥaḍramawt front) was killed, and the South suffered a terrible defeat. The southern leaders fled in all directions, to the Sultanate of Oman, Djibouti, Asmara (Eritrea), but I refused to take refuge with them. My companions and I rented cars and headed for al-‘Abr border crossing in the Empty Quarter. There we met a southern military leader who told us that five hundred tribesmen from Sufyān had arrived at al-‘Abr and demanded to cross the border into the South to protect me and fight alongside me in Aden, but he had refused them entry. My tribesmen waited at Jabal ‘Alī near the border crossing point for seven days. Then they decided to return home, because – according to the latest news – they believed that I had fallen in the battle for Aden. You have to remember that this was a time before satnav and mobile phones. Once you were on the road, you were really on your own.

²⁹ ‘Umar al-Jāwī, from Day 2012: 148 n. 40.

³⁰ Throughout Yemeni history, northern tribes have repeatedly raided Lower and southern Yemen, see, for example, Dresch 2006: 67 and *passim*. Some northerners subsequently settled down in these areas, leading to extended family networks. The “locusts” trope goes back to al-Shawkānī, see Dresch 1989: 28. The brutality of these tribal raids contributed significantly to the negative image of the northern tribes in the South. The tribes of Sufyān were no exception: after they raided Lower Yemen at the turn of the eighteenth century, women’s earrings, some with ear fragments attached, appeared for sale in markets, prompting public outrage; see Zabārah 1958: 670.

³¹ For the aborted Constitutional Revolution of 1948 and an eyewitness’ account of the sacking and pillage of Sanaa by northern tribes, see Bruck 2018.

At al-‘Abr, my companions and I left the South towards the Empty Quarter. We entered Ma’rib and stopped in Sūq al-Jalāl for lunch, then we continued to travel via the desert route towards al-Jawf. I reached my father-in-law’s house [in Saraḥāt al-Matūn] in al-Jawf at night and found my wife sleeping. I woke her up. When she caught sight of me, she flung herself into my arms, then she fainted. I picked up a water bottle and splashed some water on her face until she awoke from her faint. She told me that the news said that I had been killed in the war in Aden. The next day, we continued to Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a in Sufyān.

3 First Exile (1994–2004)

Great were the surprise and joy when Mujāhid and his companions arrived back in Sufyān. Hardly had Mujāhid reached his home village, when family and fellow tribesmen thronged around him and congratulated him for having escaped from deadly peril; they paid their respects to their shaykh and his companions whom they believed to have perished in the battle for Aden.

Back in Sufyān, and after months of breathless activism, Mujāhid at length found time to meditate on the abyss into which the defeat of Aden had plunged him. An almost incredible time it had been, perilous and murderous, weighty with destiny, and he had displayed an immense amount of passion and courage, but in the end his overwhelming exertions had been fruitless, and all he could show for was the bare rescue of his life. The scales had tilted definitively in the direction of Ṣāliḥ, who stood in control of a united Yemen and at the very climax of his power.

Indeed Mujāhid returned from Aden to a depressingly changed scene. The consequences of Ṣāliḥ’s victories – both electoral and military – soon made themselves felt. Ṣāliḥ, his extended clan and those in league with him, including ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons, had extended their dominance over the whole country. As always, the war, a devourer of men and destroyer of values, proved a profitable business for the victors, for with times of chaos there came splendid opportunities for empowerment and enrichment. After 1994, “all pretences to conceal the presidential family’s monopoly of military power were abandoned.”³² There were golden prospects for army contractors and other profiteers of the military-commercial complex.³³ And splendid possibilities

32 Day 2012: 137.

33 On the military-commercial complex and the development of the Yemeni Economic Corporation (YECO), see Seitz 2016. Burrowes and Kasper (2007) argue that after 1994

opened up in the economic sector, where money stuck to the fingers and a redistribution of property was taking place as estates, industrial facilities, and even oil fields changed hands.³⁴ In this way, the theft and plunder of the city of Aden continued even after the end of the armed battle. To give but one example, after the war the sons of al-Aḥmar asserted their rights over expensive property on the Aden waterfront.³⁵ Mujaḥid, by contrast, never managed to take possession of the estate in Aden that al-Biḍ had given him out of gratitude for his support in the 1993 elections; his claim was lost in the turmoil of the war.

Likewise in domestic political terms, Ṣāliḥ, now all-powerful, used the war to clear out the last opposition to him. YSP politicians and other adversaries were persecuted, and thousands of southerners fled into exile. The supreme southern leaders, among them al-Biḍ and Ḥaydar Abū Bakr al-ʿAṭṭās, were tried in absentia for treason, and five of them were sentenced to death.³⁶ In sum, the civil war of 1994, “erased any vestiges of Southern goodwill towards Sanaa, left the country bitterly divided and reduced to vanishing point the chance of President Ṣāliḥ being either able or willing to lead the country towards political pluralism and economic well-being.”³⁷

During the war, Ṣāliḥ had counted on crude domination. After his military victory, however, he again assumed the role of a politician who played his cards with deliberation and used the principle of tactical duality to his supreme advantage – his very style of governance, which combined authoritarianism with persuasion, intimidation with promises. Ṣāliḥ knew that in the long term a certain degree of power sharing (or its semblance) with the South and thus the inclusion of a certain number of southerners in the post-war government would be crucial to maintain northern dominance. His enemies must not unite against him, nor should his friends become too powerful. His goal was to keep all of them in well-tempered dependence – this was his style of rule, and on the whole it was successful. However, it goes without saying that he did not appoint true YSP loyalists to the post-war government, rather he appointed loyalists of (pro-North) ex-President ʿAlī Nāṣir. Hence his appointment of feeble, submissive ʿAbd Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Ḥādī, who had come to the North with ʿAlī Nāṣir in 1986 and had no power base of his own, to the post of minister of defence. Ḥādī also replaced al-Biḍ as vice president.

democracy was declining, leading to a kind of “arrested statehood” as the regime prevented state-building by encouraging oligarchy, corruption, and incompetence.

34 On post-war resource management, see Day 2012: 154–161.

35 Mercier 1997: 69–70; and Dresch 2000: 198.

36 The death sentences were later revoked, see Day 2012: 137.

37 Dunbar 1995: 58.

In dealing with the tribal shaykhs, Ṣāliḥ signalled that he was ready to let bygones be bygones and work to re-establish not cordial, but at least correct relations with those who had plotted (or rather appear to have plotted) against him in his hour of need. Many shaykhs who had been leaning towards the YSP or Iṣlāḥ party during the transition period and the civil war, now rejoined the GPC because this meant being close to Ṣāliḥ (and his resources).³⁸

Given his mutinous record, Mujāhid assumed that he would be excluded from the great reconciliation that was taking place. His conflict with Sanaa had reached a life-and-death struggle that left no room for doubt about his determination to confront Ṣāliḥ and his regime. Another phase of confrontation had begun, and Mujāhid knew all too well that in this phase his back was against the wall. Therefore, he was surprised beyond measure when a phone call reached him from the presidential office; it kindly conveyed the message that the president wished to meet him in Sanaa. Like his second personal encounter with the president in 1988, the events that followed provided him with an intimate glimpse into the sordid games and devious policies at the heart of the regime.

Indeed, Ṣāliḥ considered Mujāhid a troublesome fellow who during the transition period and the civil war had gone far beyond the parameters Ṣāliḥ had put around him. But after the civil war, which Ṣāliḥ had won with the help of the Ḥāshid, Islamist, and jihadi warriors of al-Aḥmar and the Iṣlāḥ party, a struggle for power and position had set in again, and this prompted Ṣāliḥ to turn a blind eye to Mujāhid's scandalous behaviour. In his memoirs, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar never tires of stressing the instrumental role that the Iṣlāḥ party and the tribal and Islamist militias had played in the civil war against the South, and to emphasize the "unity," "solidarity," and "cohesion" of the anti-YSP coalition³⁹ – and this was exactly the problem. For mystical sentimentalities of this sort meant little to Ṣāliḥ. To him, every partnership was a form of imprisonment. Political and military considerations fettered him to 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and the Iṣlāḥ party, who had supported him during the war and who now wanted more concessions and influence than he was prepared to give them. Ṣāliḥ was looking for ways and means to free himself from these obligations. Moreover, the post-war economic situation brought about rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the United States. This in turn also required a tougher government line against Islamist extremists, all of which strained the wartime alliance between Ṣāliḥ and the Islamists.⁴⁰

38 See Dunbar 1995: 60–61; and al-Sharjabī 2009: 63.

39 Al-Aḥmar 2008: 289–290.

40 Whitaker 1997: 27. See also Schwedler 2006: 188.

Mujāhid knew nothing of these deliberations when he received the president's invitation. In fact, he felt uneasy for another reason. In 1987, his father had been murdered after such a meeting with the president in Sanaa, and his fate gave Mujāhid ample reason to believe that the invitation also served to lure him from Sufyān to the slippery ground of the capital. The chances seemed against his ever being able to get away unscathed. The whole idea of visiting Ṣāliḥ seemed almost suicidal to him.

Most unwillingly, and with a sense of disquiet and foreboding, at length Mujāhid agreed to go to Sanaa and see what Ṣāliḥ had to offer, but on the condition that Ṣāliḥ provide him with a guarantor to ensure his safe conduct. To his astonishment, Ṣāliḥ immediately consented to his demand and even appointed as his guarantor Shaykh Qā'id Shuwayṭ of Saḥār, who was a friend of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and a patron of the Salafi teaching centre Dār al-Ḥadīth at Dammāj.⁴¹ After the civil war, which had given the Islamists an enormous boost, Qā'id Shuwayṭ had risen to become a person of some importance in tribal-Islamist circles. It was only in retrospect that Mujāhid understood that in fact Ṣāliḥ had deliberately calculated that Qā'id Shuwayṭ would attend their meeting, listen to their conversation, and inform 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar (plus their Islamist friends) about its content; in this way Ṣāliḥ aimed to convey a hidden threat to his former war-time allies who had by then already become a burden to him.

Coming from Ṣa'da, the guarantor Shaykh Qā'id Shuwayṭ made a stopover in Sufyān in order to bring Mujāhid and his escorts to Sanaa. In the presidential palace in Jamāl Street, in the bustling centre of the capital, Ṣāliḥ surprised Mujāhid with a friendly reception.

At that time Ṣāliḥ was filled with self-conceit and complacency because of his victory over the South, and during our meeting it surfaced that he also wanted to get rid of the Iṣlāḥ [party]. Ṣāliḥ did not say this expressly, rather he went on talking about common goals, the possibilities of cooperation, and the like. The meaning of that was not lost on me, for I understood all too well that something sinister lay behind his lofty talk, and that he wanted to win me over to counter the influence of al-Aḥmar and the Iṣlāḥ [party]. Yet I loathed him too much to make common cause with him, and the prospect of using my blood feud for his personal benefit remained utterly repugnant to me. Eventually I put an end to his sermon

41 The Salafi teaching centre Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Khayriyya was established in 1979 by Muqbil b. Ḥādī l-Wādī'ī (d. 2001) at Dammāj in the Zaydi heartland of northern Yemen. Some of the area's shaykhs assumed protective roles towards the centre, see Brandt 2017a: 106–111.

and interrupted him by saying, “It seems that ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar is the real master [of Yemen], because I have met you many times and you have never offered me any solutions.”

At this point, Ṣāliḥ’s attitude towards Mujaḥid changed, and the dialogue that had begun as an amiable talk, took a caustic turn. Ṣāliḥ knew from previous encounters with Mujaḥid that his nature was so intrepid, his will so firm, that once he took a decision, he would not give way; that he would continue this hopeless opposition rather than accept a feigned pardon that would give Ṣāliḥ a halo of magnanimity and grace. Annoyed by Mujaḥid’s renewed, or continued, refusal to cooperate, Ṣāliḥ conducted the rest of the conversation in the icy tone of an outraged great power.

Ṣāliḥ appeared much exercised over my rebuff. Naturally, he did not like to deal with people who had a strong personality. He only liked [to deal with] yes-men who told him, “Aye, aye, as you like” (*ḥāḍir, ḥāḍir, kayfamā bidak*).

He began scolding me, “Well, then, now I want to hear whatever excuses you care to offer up for your latest enormities. You, and your father before you, you are from Sufyān, there is nothing good in you, you were always against me, you were with the royalists and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn, then with the NDF, then with the socialists. Now, with the socialists defeated, there is no one left to support you except the Jews, if you go to them!”

I replied, “Because of your vanity and tyranny we would gladly put our hands into the hands of the Jews if they supported us. But the Jews wouldn’t accept us because you are their first agent in Yemen!”

Ṣāliḥ went black with anger. He reared up like a viper and shouted, “You are an insolent rogue! It is impossible to come to terms with you!” His menacing posture made me leap to my feet and place my hand on my side, ready to defend myself. Then the guarantor Shaykh Qā’id Shuwayṭ, may God rest his soul, also rose from his chair and said, “You are both insolent” (*kilākumā jalafayn*)!

Mujaḥid had to listen to a passionate arraignment of himself as Ṣāliḥ assumed the role of a man enraged beyond all bearing. He continued with furious invectives against Mujaḥid, his “mania for creating problems” and the “pack of rascals” (*ḥazimat awghād*) – this was aimed at his fellow tribesmen – who, in his eyes, formed a compact hostile body opposed to his government and in permanent rebellion against him.

Our meeting ended with Ṣāliḥ saying that he was now finally convinced that we would never reach any agreement. When we were done, I left the presidential palace with my companions and we headed towards al-Jirāf [neighbourhood in northern Sanaa], where we planned to pass the night before continuing via the desert route to Sufyān the next morning. We knew that Ṣāliḥ's tantrum meant danger, and we were in a state of heightened vigilance. The traffic was fairly heavy, but we did not hear nor see anything suspicious to give rise to alarm.

However, when we reached Māzdā Street, all at once we got into an ambush of the military police, who launched an attack on us with truck-mounted machine guns. One of my companions suddenly roared in anguished pain and crumpled on his seat, and our car broke down beyond repair. Our second car stopped to defend us. Dashing for cover to escape what was now murderous gunfire, we forced our way into the cover of adjacent buildings, from where we resumed shooting. We were almost suffocating on gun smoke as shots rang out and bullets ricocheted off the walls. After a gun battle of half an hour, our guarantor Shaykh Qā'id Shuwayṭ appeared on the scene and demanded an end to the hostilities. When it was all over, two of us were wounded, and one of the cars was lost. The military police had three wounded people. Later on, we learnt that they were taken to Russia for treatment. After we returned to Sufyān, Ṣāliḥ sent the Firqa on a punitive campaign against us, for flimsy reasons, and demanded my return to Sanaa.

This time, the Firqa's approaching mechanized colossus left the Sufyān little more than their courage. The fall of Aden and the southern military defeat had given them a good scare, and Mujāhid and his tribesmen knew that they no longer stood a chance against the regime. Ṣāliḥ, in cahoots with 'Alī Muḥsin, would never cease to hatch new plots to harass and punish them for their tenacious opposition. It would take many men and resources to counter the regime's concerted onslaught, and even in Mujāhid's heyday, he hardly commanded that. His tribe was outnumbered and, after the loss of their southern sponsor, they were underequipped and financially exhausted. The situation was hopeless.

Although Mujāhid had demonstrated his courage in the civil war, the southern defeat had reduced him to the role of a failed campaigner, a fifth column working for the other, now defeated side. His issue of revenge with *bayt* al-Aḥmar had left behind a trail of blood, and had still failed to reach its ultimate goal. His Talāḥum party project had been thwarted by Ṣāliḥ's machinations; the political project did not materialize, and the whole movement had collapsed, its members scattered or at odds again. After the excitement

and elation of the transition period, the erstwhile “unity” of the Bakīl shaykhs had again dissolved into strife and feuding; most of them had returned to the routine of petty squabbles and double-dealings with Sanaa. Many dismissed the grassroots activism of the transition period with an irritated shrug. The southern leaders were dead, in jail, or living in exile, and everywhere in the country Islamism was rearing its head. At this juncture, and though he held firmly to the conviction that he had acted rightly, Mujāhid was a man finished and done with.

I gathered the shaykhs and *‘uqqāl* of Sufyān and told them, “The tribes have fallen or have been silenced, and no one except us remains to confront the regime. The YSP, which helped with money and arms to keep us on our feet, is gone. Ṣāliḥ will continue to confront us and send out punitive campaigns against us on the grounds of false accusations and calumnies, and our defensive potential is at an end. Peradventure we could achieve a settlement if Ṣāliḥ was the only problem. But ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar will never cease sowing discord between us, and the extremisms he introduced into Yemen are not only devouring me and my people, but have even penetrated into the mosques and [fomented] theological debates. And you, my tribesmen, you are brave, you are heroes, you would never abandon me, you would never hesitate to fight alongside me and defend me against our enemies. But I do not want to sacrifice you in defence of myself, especially at this very difficult point in time when Ṣāliḥ is victorious and all the tribes remain subdued.”

I told them, “I will leave Yemen and look for a sponsor, a powerful patron. If I find one, I will return to you from abroad. And if I do not find support, I will stay abroad so as to relieve you of my presence, which would attract ever further persecution and spilled blood. For if I leave Yemen, tensions will ease, the punitive campaigns against you will stop, and you will live in safety and peace. My absence from Yemen will save your blood and help you find repose.” We discussed this, and we agreed on this, and I left Sufyān and Yemen via smugglers’ paths and al-Khaḍrā’ border crossing point [at Najrān] for Saudi Arabia; later I moved on to Syria. I did not find support and stayed abroad for a long time. And my tribe remained safe during my absence.

Those Who Loosen and Those Who Bind (2004–)

لأنني بكلي وبكل هي التاريخ في كل تغيير

For I am Bakīlī, and Bakīl is the history of all change



One cannot help looking back upon the 2000s with some vexation. The dominant impression of Yemen's "long 2000s" – from the USS Cole bombing in 2000 to Ṣāliḥ's forced retirement in early 2012 – is that of a grandiose failure in which Ṣāliḥ seemed to run headlong to his own destruction, dragging the whole country along with him on his path into the abyss. Seen close-up, this period is replete with acts of hubris, ignorance, short-sightedness, ruthless gambling, and treachery, all of which gives testimony of Ṣāliḥ's misjudgement of the situation, his loss of contact with reality, and the way he left a people and a land in ruins.

In 2004, when Mujāhid returned to Yemen from exile in Syria, he resumed his struggle against the regime, though the setting of the conflict had once again changed shape. His return came at a time of mass sectarian intoxication, when extremisms took hold of Yemen. After the country's late Cold War and post-Cold War transformations of the 1980s and 1990s, the 2000s were marked by religious radicalization and the domestic ramifications of the "Global War on Terror."¹ In northernmost Yemen, religious radicalization and the militarization of faith took on a form shaped by the local setting of the highlands, as a political struggle in the guise of a "clash of

1 The Global War on Terror was an international military campaign launched by the US government following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; it had far-reaching domestic political consequences for Yemen. Ṣāliḥ used and directed the threats emanating from al-Qaeda to manipulate US foreign policy towards Yemen. This was a component of his informal system of rule, which was based on the sponsorship and exploitation of conflict among its opponents and rivals, and which Phillips (2011a) dubbed the "politics of permanent crisis." For similar interpretations, see Wedeen 2008: 148–185 and Blumi 2018: 142–169. Much has been published about the domestic ramifications of 9/11 in Yemen, see, for example, Day 2012: 195–209; Carapico 2014: 41–47; Seitz 2014: 60–62; and Bonnefoy 2018: 63–66.

fundamentalisms”² between Sunni and Shi‘i extremists; the former largely in the form of the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis, the latter also known as Zaydi revivalists or “Ḥūthīs.”

Although one of the republic’s declared objectives was the elimination of *madhhab* distinctions, from the late 1970s Sunni Islamist groups, supported by political and tribal circles around Saudi-friendly ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, gained influence.³ Shaykhs hailing from lineages adhering to Zaydi Islam, like ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, had sound reasons for abandoning their ancestors’ *madhhab* and embracing Sunni Islamism instead, for they were perfectly aware of the political dimension of radical Sunnism’s anti-sayyid thrust, and capitalized on it in order to reinforce their own leadership claims against the *sāda*, who had retained much of their influence in the northern highlands after the revolution. General ‘Alī Muḥsin, who was likewise known for his anti-Hashemite views, emerged as a proponent of Sunni Islamism (specifically of the Muslim Brothers), while cultivating close connections to even more radical groups.⁴

By contrast, Ṣāliḥ, thanks to his enduring lack of principles and conspicuous freedom from convictions, did not side with any of these *madhhabs*. Above all else, he was interested in their supportive potential; he had used Islamist forces rallied by ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar to suppress the NDF in the War of the Central Areas in the early 1980s and again in the 1994 civil war against southern secessionists. After 1994, Ṣāliḥ managed to free himself from their grip and shifted his focus to Salafis instead. Quietist Salafi teachings were much more acceptable to him (and to his autocratic peers), not least because they represented much of what the political Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood did not – above all, the Salafis believed that obedience to the ruler is mandatory.⁵

2 See Weir 1997. During her fieldwork in the tribally-organized communities of the Rāziḥ in the Yemeni-Saudi borderlands in the 1980s, Weir was one of the first anthropologists to observe the emerging sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi‘i Islamists.

3 See also Dresch 2000: 172–174.

4 General ‘Alī Muḥsin maintained close ties to militant Islamist groups, including the so-called “Arab Afghans” (Arab veterans of the Afghanistan war), and al-Qaeda. He was married to a sister of Ṭāriq al-Faḍlī, a local al-Qaeda celebrity and son of a former southern sultan who fought in Afghanistan with Usama bin Laden, see Dorlian 2011: 187; Dorlian 2013: 137; and Day 2012: 177, 198. On al-Qaeda in Yemen, see Johnsen 2013; Kendall 2015; Kendall 2016; and Kendall 2018.

5 Salafi doctrine insists on respect for the ruling power, even if it is corrupt (Salafis legitimate a political ruler only when they themselves benefit from it, naturally). They distrust or entirely reject democratic forms and parliamentary policies and instead promote complete loyalty to a ruler. In this regard Salafi doctrine fundamentally differs from the quest for social justice, which many from among the Muslim Brothers, jihadis, and also Zaydis pursue (Zaydis through the concept of *khurūj*; albeit traditional Zaydi elites in Yemen were not very democratically oriented), see Bonnefoy 2011: 88–97. On the Salafi movement in Yemen, see Dresch

The Zaydis, who make up a large proportion of the population in the northern highlands, perceived of the spread of various types of radical Sunnism as a threat, for a variety of reasons. From the late 1980s, a Zaydi revival movement had begun to take shape; this movement aimed at countering the onslaught of the Sunni Islamists and the government's policy of neglect vis-à-vis its northern, Zaydi-dominated areas.⁶ Since the turn of the millennium, Zaydi revivalism was dominated by Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, a sayyid from Marrān in Ṣa'da's western mountains. Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī's evocative blend of Zaydi revivalism, social justice, and anti-imperialist narratives in combination with the religious and economic deprivation of the local population and popular anger at the regime's cooperation with the US "War on Terror" soon gained him a substantial following. Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī managed to rally various discontented elements to his cause – pious Zaydis, disgruntled *sāda*, disaffected tribes, those unemployed, those dissatisfied with the status quo, and many more. The great danger with regard to the northern highlands was that many tribespeople clung to their old Zaydi faith, whereas some shaykhs patronized by the government had gone over to the Sunni Islamist camp that was dominated by the Ḥāshid under the tutelage of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and General 'Alī Muḥsin, the latter and his First Armoured Division (the Firqa) was in charge of the North-Western Military Region, that is, the northern highlands.

In 2004, at the time of Mujāhid's return to Yemen, the conflict between the Ḥūthīs and the regime was on the verge of becoming violent. The Ḥūthī rebellion in Ṣa'da certainly would have been manageable for Ṣāliḥ if there had not been, at the same time, friction at the core of his regime, that is, in the innermost circle of his close relatives and the elite of the Sanḥān tribe, all of whom occupied key positions in Yemen's military and security.⁷ At the time of Ṣāliḥ's ascension to power in 1978, this innermost circle had designated Ṣāliḥ's relative, General 'Alī Muḥsin (generally seen as Ṣāliḥ's foster brother), as his successor. Since the late 1990s, and in violation of this agreement, Ṣāliḥ had begun to position his eldest son, Aḥmad, to succeed him. Thus, 'Alī Muḥsin became an obstacle (the main obstacle, in fact) to Ṣāliḥ's unlimited control. Consequently, rivalries in the very centre of the regime were on the rise, between the 'Afāsh

and Haykel 1995: 413; Bruck 1998: 154–165; Haykel 2002; Burgat and Sbitli 2002; Bonnefoy 2008; Bonnefoy 2009; Bonnefoy 2011; and Yadav 2013.

6 On Zaydi revivalism and the emergence of the Ḥūthīs, see, for example, Bruck 1998: 165–180; Bruck 1999; Bruck 2017: 265–268; Hamidi 2009; Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells 2010; Brandt 2017a: 131–144; Blumi 2018: 164–168; Brandt and Weissenburger 2022; and Lackner 2023: 51–64.

7 Phillips 2011a: 87–93. On the entanglements of Ṣāliḥ's clan with the military-economic complex, see Seitz 2014; Seitz 2016.

clan (those related to Ṣāliḥ) and the Qāḍī clan (those related to ‘Alī Muḥsin), and threatened to fracture the innermost circle of power.⁸

The situation's combustibility – the emergence of a dangerous rebellion in the North with a simultaneously impending schism at the core of the regime – required extreme caution from Ṣāliḥ if he wanted to secure his grip on power. It meant he had to find a way to accommodate ‘Alī Muḥsin and cooperate with him constructively, in order to manage the Ḥūthīs and to avert the danger of an “intra-regime proxy war” at a most inopportune moment.⁹ Instead, and characteristically, Ṣāliḥ began to play his enemies against one another. From 2006 onwards, each tactical move was slanted toward setting up the “segmentary constellation,” that is, achieving a victory over one adversary (‘Alī Muḥsin) with the help of the other (the Ḥūthīs). In the framework of the sectarian conflicts and intra-regime struggles of the 2000s, Ṣāliḥ repeatedly applied these practices that had led him to such easy triumphs in the 1980s and 1990s.

But this time Ṣāliḥ, who entered this gamble with the expectation of ultimately triumphing, made mistake after mistake. His policy vis-à-vis ‘Alī Muḥsin and the Ḥūthīs did not yield the results he desired, for he misread many signs and eventually lost hold of the entire situation. One reason for Ṣāliḥ's miscalculations was the obstinate blindness with which he pressed forward into military conflict, at a time when the very edifice of his power was pervaded by cracks. This behaviour can be viewed as a sign that he was losing contact with reality. His cardinal mistake was certainly his deployment of the armed forces on a large scale in highland Yemen's precariously balanced and heavily armed tribal environment, as this deployment triggered destructive cycles of violence and counter-violence that step by step engulfed Yemen's whole North. In fact, he should have resorted, as usual, to tactics of manipulation and indirect rule through patronage, co-optation, and conflict by proxy. There is, in fact, every indication that Ṣāliḥ was throwing aside the very policies that had enabled him to manage northern Yemen's tribal realms for twenty-five years. It almost seems as if he was, at last, tired of the endless talking, manoeuvring, and detours; and was aiming to eliminate, once and for all, his adversaries and foes.

In stark contrast to the regime's increasingly heedless and erratic actions, the Ḥūthīs under Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī had an agenda and a strategy for achieving it that fell on fertile ground in the northern highlands. The Ḥūthī movement would not have become a genuine menace to the regime if it lacked leadership and an agenda. Because the impulse to violence was inspired with a narrative,

8 On the succession issue, see also Longley Alley 2008: 87 n. 129, 95; Day 2012: 212–213; Transfeld 2012: 95; and Transfeld 2016: 4.

9 Day 2012: 218.

the Ḥūthīs were able to form a broad movement sustained by those highland tribes that felt disaffected and marginalized by the regime. This broad movement included the long-neglected and politically sidelined Zaydi parts of Bakīl, including the Sufyān, who during the Ṣaʿda wars, the ensuing Ḥūthī expansions, and eventually the endgame between Ṣāliḥ and the Ḥūthīs in 2017 became “those who loosen and bind” (*ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd*), a classical Islamic phrase signifying those who play a role in the seizure of power and deposition of a ruler.¹⁰ The narrative of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī reconciled them and persuaded them to swear allegiance to the Ḥūthīs; it gave the Bakīl (temporarily, at least) something that they had long been lacking: unity, leadership, and direction. The Ḥūthīs exposed the inner contradictions and the political void of the Ṣāliḥ regime, which by then had outlived itself and had little ideological means to oppose the movement, apart from some hollow phrases from the 1960s.

This is the setting into which Mujaḥid returned when he left Syria for Yemen. Henceforth the matrix of his struggle with the regime was no longer the country’s late Cold War and post-Cold War transformations, but the Ḥūthī wars and, even more importantly, the fission at the heart of the regime itself. The theatre had changed, with new characters on stage, and the struggle between Mujaḥid and the regime, which was fought in a tribal arena in the 1980s and in a political arena in the 1990s, now played out in the sectarian setting of the Ṣaʿda wars. Upon his return, the struggle between Mujaḥid and Ṣāliḥ recommenced; it was a struggle that had taken other names and changing forms, but was continually refought – the sectarian conflicts of the 2000s were no more than a temporary, accidental form. Again, Mujaḥid’s destiny was closely linked to the ebb and flow of the power balance in Yemen. Yet this time, in the context of intra-regime struggle and the increasingly brutal Ṣaʿda wars, Mujaḥid only prevailed for two years: from the beginning of the first Ṣaʿda war in 2004 until after the presidential elections of 2006.

In 2004, the conflict in Ṣaʿda transformed Sufyān again from a dead end into a crossroads, and lent supreme importance to the highway between Sanaa and Ṣaʿda, including the narrow gap of al-Mudarrij. From 2004 to 2005, during the first and the second Ṣaʿda wars, Ṣāliḥ’s primary objective was to get Mujaḥid away from the highway and out of Sufyān, and to prevent him from blocking the road or intervening in the battle in support of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī. After the presidential elections of 2006, when he was emboldened enough to address the succession issue anew, Ṣāliḥ changed direction and deliberately pushed

10 Zaman 2007.

Mujāhid into a personal conflict with ‘Alī Muḥsin, by provoking them against each another into a confrontation in the framework of the Ṣa‘da wars.

Again, a triangular situation came into being, this time between Mujāhid and Ṣāliḥ and ‘Alī Muḥsin. Deeply worried about the new quality of this confrontation, and with the Ḥūthīs impatiently waiting to enter and accept the Sufyān into their fold, Mujāhid resolved to avert the looming disaster and leave Yemen again, this time for good. While Yemen descended ever further into war, and as alliances no longer materialized, there was nothing left for Mujāhid but to move from country to country, by and by entering into a state of limbo, in the rootless, ever fluctuating world of the exile. Leaving Yemen and his ambitions thus impeded, Mujāhid’s life seemed to break off, as if someone simply tore out its last pages.

1 Liminal Interlude (1995–2004)

After the civil war with the South in 1994, mounting pressure had forced Mujāhid into exile. The nine years he spent in compulsory retirement in Saudi Arabia and Syria brought about a significant change to his former social status; he suffered the metaphorical “social death” caused by the multiple ruptures of displacement, and entered into a state of “liminality.” Liminality is a state of transition between one stage and the next, a quality of ambiguity, especially between major stages in one’s life, when individuals have left their former status but have not yet entered a new status that is to come after the liminal stage.¹¹ During the nine years of enforced caesura, Mujāhid’s liminal situation attained a twofold quality, as exile engendered his dislocation in both a spatio-temporal and a social sense.

In the 1994 civil war, and for political reasons, Saudi Arabia and the socialists in Aden had closed ranks against Ṣāliḥ. After the civil war was lost, and with Ṣāliḥ ruling the state, Mujāhid joined the wave of refugees that included former leaders from the South and the remnants of the southern armed forces, who eluded prosecution and were granted sanctuary in Saudi Arabia. Mujāhid had been at the centre of events in Sufyān since his father’s death in 1987, and after eight years of unrest and excitement, it seems to have been difficult for him to let go of his former life. Once he crossed the border into Saudi Arabia,

11 See van Gennep 1909, and further elaborations of the concept of liminality by Turner 1969 and Thomassen 2009. The term “social death” goes back to Patterson 1982.

he tried to maintain his usual activism and carry on his opposition against the regime by other means.

After the war of 1994, material issues forced me out of Yemen, but I also left Yemen in order to protect my tribe, because after Ṣāliḥ had defeated the socialists, he aimed to clear out the last remnants of opposition, and few were left to confront him except me and my tribe. My absence from Yemen was comfortable for me and saved the blood of my tribesmen.

Did you enjoy good relations with the Saudis?

No. But it was necessary [to go to Saudi Arabia] because I could not leave Yemen via the airport [in Sanaa]. Initially the Saudis cared about me, as a result of what they knew about my position in the Yemeni [political] arena, because governments always seek relations with those who are strong, [this is] particularly [true of] the governments of countries like Saudi Arabia that pursue expansionist and confrontational policies. But after I had stayed in Saudi Arabia for some time, their client (*ʿāmil*) ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar visited the kingdom and made them break [off relations] with me and end their support of me. So I focused again on the southerners, who at that time were working towards the formation of a Yemeni opposition movement called MOWJ, and I became a member of the movement's national council. I received a small salary from this opposition, and this enabled me to keep my head above water, and with which I made my living.

MOWJ was an opposition movement founded by southern opposition leader ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Jifri and the 1986–94 leadership of the YSP. It comprised the group of former socialist leaders who fled the country in 1994, many of whom had settled in Saudi Arabia. The movement waged a propaganda campaign against the government in Sanaa, yet failed to become a credible alternative because it was seen as the elongated arm of the Saudis.¹² In the late 1990s, the resumption of negotiations between Sanaa and Riyadh on the renewal of the Treaty of Ṭāʾif of 1934, which defined the Yemeni-Saudi boundary and resulted in the Treaty of Jeddah in 2000, also meant the end of MOWJ.¹³

12 On MOWJ, also called *mawj* (lit., “wave”; possibly an acronym for *al-jabha al-waṭaniyya li-l-muʿāraḍa* or National Opposition Front), see al-Jifri 1997b: 190–192; Whitaker 1997: 26–27; Carapico 1998: 187; Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 304.

13 In 2000, the perennial renewal of the Treaty of Ṭāʾif was due; since 1934 this treaty had defined the disputed boundary between Yemen and Saudi Arabia and was renewed every twenty lunar years. The main point of contention was both states' belief in their entitlement to the provinces of Najrān, ʿAsīr, and Jizān, which fell to Saudi Arabia after the

In the run-up to the Treaty of Jeddah, Ṣāliḥ requested that the Saudis sever their relationship with MOWJ and cut all kinds of support to it. Saudi Arabia responded to Ṣāliḥ's demands, and our financial conditions worsened. Most of the southern leaders decided to return to Yemen. I also got tired of Saudi Arabia and moved on to Syria, where I enrolled my sons Sufyān and Muḥammad at Damascus University. For foreigners, schooling and study in Saudi Arabia were expensive and only possible with great difficulty.

I remained in Syria for four years, steadfast and patient, and continued to search for a foreign political party that would support me. But in the end I was unable to find a sponsor. Even the Americans did not want a relationship with me because I spent years of my life in Damascus. They must have thought that I spent them studying Arab nationalism. They did not know that I spent them in dance parties and the nightlife, to free my mind from the years of terrors and ardours in Yemen [*laughs*].

In Saudi Arabia, Mujāhid lost his close connection to social and tribal life in Sufyān. In Syria, he was also disconnected from the political opposition to the Ṣāliḥ regime. As time went by, his customary activism began to decrease, and gave way to a period of indifference and waiting, an aimless passage of time. With the monotony of an uneventful life, one that was interrupted only by superficial pleasures, boredom began to grip him. He, who had always been so industrious, so passionate a campaigner, began to experience this enforced caesura as a useless interlude, a cruel disturbance to his true purpose in life. Now that he was disconnected from tribal and political life in Yemen, he had only one support left – time.

Thus far, time had always helped him, and time worked for him once more. During his absence, new currents of religious thought began to agitate Yemen and developed momentum in the precariously balanced sociopolitical and multi-denominational environment of the northern highlands. Long-existent sectarian fault lines began to show new signs of stress, adding to the political unrest still simmering beneath the surface. During his time in exile, both Sunni Islamism and a new type of Zaydi revivalism had struck deep roots in northern Yemen. The cleavage between these currents was felt throughout the

Saudi-Yemeni war of 1934 and were then (in 2000) given up by the Yemeni government to become part of Saudi Arabia in the Treaty of Jeddah; see Schofield 1992; Schofield 2000; and al-Enazy 2005. For consenting to the final cessation of these territories to Saudi Arabia, Ṣāliḥ was able to demand favours from the Saudis, such as budgetary aid and support for Yemen's accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

highlands, with some people supporting Sunni Islamism whilst others gravitated towards Zaydi revivalism; some advocated the “new,” “imported,” “egalitarian” faith of the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis, whilst others adhered to the “ancestral,” “hierarchic” Zaydi faith of their ancestors. And all of them were encouraged in their zeal by fanatical preachers and the meddling of domestic and foreign powers.

Mujāhid, with his profoundly secular disposition, detested all of them equally. Since the 1970s–80s War of the Central Areas against the NDF, the Sunni Islamists had been allies of his family’s hereditary foes: ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and General ‘Alī Muḥsin. Certainly Mujāhid’s violent dislike of the Islamists was also a demonstration of idiosyncrasy. He might have reached a compromise with less virulent forms of Islamism, but the rigid rules and zealousness of the Muslim Brothers and Salafism were simply contrary to his temperament. Mujāhid, who had come to know and appreciate the pleasures of urban life in Damascus, perceived the bigotry of Sunni Islamism as unbearable. Nothing could have been more offensive to his nature than the dogmatism of Sunni Islamism, the iconoclastic destruction of the Zaydi graves and tombstones, and other tokens of “reprehensible innovations,” and the dislike of merriment incorporated into these doctrines.¹⁴ Nothing could have been more repulsive to him than the bigotry of the Islamists, who demanded immediate acquiescence to their own opinions while they looked upon those who failed to agree with them as *kuffār* (heretics). They banned all good spirits and cast a gloomy shadow over the highlands, which were already condemned to austerity by nature. Just as he had long refused to succumb to the political outlooks of the Ṣāliḥ regime, so he refused to align with religious doctrines that were alien and unacceptable to him.

At the same time, during Mujāhid’s absence, the movement of the Shabāb al-Mu’min (the Believing Youth), had struck roots in the Zaydi-dominated northern highlands. The Shabāb al-Mu’min was a Zaydi revivalist movement and organization, many of whose members had begun, around the year 2000, to call themselves “Ḥūthīs” in reference to their spiritual leader Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, a sayyid from the mountains of Marrān in Ṣa’dā province, about 60 kilometres north-west from Sufyān. Under the tutelage of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, Zaydi religious revivalists began to embrace social-revolutionary and political components and eventually aimed to unite the interests of those who felt economically neglected, politically sidelined, religiously marginalized, as well as those

14 On the desecration of graves by Sunni Islamists, see Haykel 1995; Haykel 1999: 197; and Haykel 2003: 127–138.

who detested the present status of events in Yemen (and there were plenty of people unhappy with current events).¹⁵ In largely Zaydi Sufyān, and because of this history of loyalties and unstable relations with the Ṣāliḥ regime, the Ḥūthī movement found particularly favourable conditions in which to take root and flourish. In fact, in a few years' time, Sufyān readily succumbed to the Ḥūthīs and became one of their main strongholds.¹⁶

Mujāhid observed the rise of the Ḥūthīs with mistrust. He was characteristically unable to recognize any principle of subordination, and he felt personally unable to accept the Ḥūthīs' emphasis on the claim to leadership of the *ahl al-bayt* (in Yemen called *sāda*). Though Mujāhid was the scion of an ancient Zaydi lineage, and his revered father had been a champion of the royalist cause in the 1960s civil war, he rejected the Ḥūthī doctrine that related to the latter's claim of "sayyid supremacy" (locally referred to as *sulāliyya*). That is, he could not abide the *sāda*'s claim to leadership inherent in Zaydi doctrine, and thus the Ḥūthīs' attempt to reinvigorate socio-religious distinctions and hierarchies that had been erased by the 1962 revolution. The concept of *sulāliyya* (sayyid supremacy) was an emotionally charged issue that inflamed the passions of the Yemenis across the nation.¹⁷ Despite Mujāhid's virulent rejection of the Ṣāliḥ regime, he championed the tribal cause and fundamentally adhered to Yemeni republicanism, which delegitimized the *sāda*'s claim to leadership and aimed to create a new national identity based on non-sectarian state Islam and historic and tribal heritage.¹⁸ Mujāhid's refusal to acknowledge the religious authority of the *sāda* was also evident in the way he always referred to them as Banū Hāshim (a term denoting the clan of the Quraysh tribe, to which the Prophet belonged) and never as *sāda*, which meant "masters" or "lords," and thus conveyed a notion of hierarchy and superiority over Yemen's other social strata, including the tribes. Later in his life, after their short-lived rapprochement in 2015, Mujāhid came to detest the Ḥūthīs even more than he detested Ṣāliḥ, for

15 Brandt 2017a: 131–139.

16 On history and ramifications of the Ḥūthī conflict in Sufyān, see Brandt 2013.

17 On different aspects of this sayyid-tribe antagonism in Ḥūthī times, see Lackner 2021; Weissenburger 2021; and Brandt 2022.

18 Adra 1993; Bruck 2005: 52–63; Brandt 2017a: 52–57; and Varisco 2017: 241. Weissenburger (2021) observed that after consolidation of their power in Sanaa, Ḥūthī propagandists worked to highlight pre-Islamic genealogical connections between the 'Adnānī *sāda* and the Qaḥṭānī tribes of Yemen, in order to rectify their stigma as "foreigners" and "strangers in the house" and hence portray sayyid rule as a form of indigenous governance.

Ṣāliḥ was an oppressor and a dictator, but he would never say, “I am the supreme race and I am the best of the sons of Yemen.” Unlike the Banū Hāshim, who consider themselves the masters (*sāda*) of others, by God’s command (*bi-amr Allāh*). Zaydi doctrine serves and sanctifies the Banū Hāshim at our [i.e., the tribes’] expense, and we are the sons of Qaḥṭān, the original Yemenis.

There is a creative element in waiting. Waiting relaxes, purifies, assures, and rearranges what breathless activism had dissipated. Waiting can be a transformative process that produces and sharpens human will, agency, and desire, and hence “trigger(s) for various forms of social energies.”¹⁹ This was true for Mujāhid, whose time of compulsory retirement in Damascus provided him with quiet, safety, leisure, and amusement, but could never satisfy his craving for activism. The tranquillity of his time in Syrian exile was nothing but semblance, for over the years his desire for retribution remained undiminished and even increased.

In 1995, when Mujāhid left Yemen at the age of twenty-one, life had already left him with memories of the kind no one could forget, and had inspired in him feelings of hatred of the kind that last a lifetime. How could he forget the day when the corpse of his brother Ḥasan arrived at his home village; it was the treacherous assassination of Ḥasan in 1981 that had opened up this Pandora’s box of feuding and war and murderous ambition. How could he forget when his brothers Ḥaydar and Ḥāmis had been murdered – Ḥaydar by his best friend and brother-in-law, who had been seduced by the enemy – and Ḥāmis, the victim of an ambush that had been set for his father by his former bodyguards. Could he forget when he bade farewell to his father, who went to meet the president in Sanaa, and returned as a corpse. Mujāhid had seen every form of horrific injury a bullet can do to the human body. He was not likely to forget the period during which he was held hostage in the Qishla in al-Ḥarf, the ambushes and attempts on his life, the 1994 war in al-ʿAnad and besieged Aden, and the Firqa’s countless punitive campaigns in Sufyān. The contemptuous and humiliating treatment he received by the regime’s political elite still rankled and antagonized him. His hatred for the murderers of his brothers and his father, his loathing of *bayt* al-Aḥmar and ʿAlī Muḥsin and the Ṣāliḥ system were as intense as ever, and still unmitigated by revenge.

On the other hand, the forced exile from Yemen had helped him personally and politically. It enabled him to leave behind the disaster of the 1994 civil war

19 Bandak and Janeja 2018: 1.

and the ensuing climate of repression, and remain an untarnished paragon of the tribal opposition. After he had spent long periods of his life under the stress of peer pressure, persecution, and material need, the liminal interlude in Saudi Arabia and Syria gave him time for introspection. With the passage of time, his desire to resume his struggle against the regime and return to Yemen, his true “moral destination,” was strengthened.²⁰ After being unwilling or unable to make Saudi Arabia or Syria his home, he strongly felt that the social death he suffered in his enforced exile from his native environment could only be overcome by returning home. Return was the only way for him to reclaim his life.

2 From Dead Ends to Crossroads (2004–2005)

Nine years after Mujāhid had left Yemen, the first of those great caesuras that so strikingly divided up his life finally came to an end. The decision to return to Yemen, his true “moral destination,” was even easier for him as material issues and the precariousness of his economic situation had rendered his return inevitable. One spring day in 2004, on the threshold of his thirtieth year, he crossed the Saudi-Yemeni boundary into Ṣa‘da governorate.

I returned to Sufyān from Syria in early 2004 by the land route via Jordan and Saudi Arabia. At the ‘Ilb border crossing [in Ṣa‘da], I was welcomed by more than two thousand men of my tribe, who came to the Saudi border on the day of my return in order to receive me. After crossing the border into Yemen, the road was jammed with cars and people who thronged around me and brought me home to Sufyān under hundreds of rifle shots of salute and joy, by way of expressing their pleasure at my return.

Later on we heard that, upon the news of my return, Ṣāliḥ had called Colonel Yaḥyā l-‘Amrī, the governor of Ṣa‘da. Ṣāliḥ’s irritation increased when he learnt about the wild excitement of my tribesmen and the majestic reception they gave me when I crossed the border into Yemen. He had certainly expected that my long absence from Yemen would diminish my clout among my people (*thiqli fi qawmi*), and was surprised to learn that the contrary was true.

20 Malkki 1992: 35–36.

Mujāhid's reception by his tribesmen showed their attachment to him and their pleasure at his return, and his heart warmed with the affection from his tribesmen's rustic endeavours. For nine years, he had been in the background, but apparently this temporary invisibility enveloped him in a luminous cloud, an aureole of glory. Endowed by nature with eloquence and charm, virile in his audacity, intrepid as an avenger, an ardent lover of the skirmish and the fray, and backed by an iron will and incorruptible resolution, he embodied many of those tribal virtues that were of the more chivalrous and martial kind, and that had won him a train of followers. With his return, something vibrant, something encouraging, a remnant of tribal greatness returned to the austere and neglected land of Sufyān.

The rejoicing went on for weeks after my return. The members of my tribe offered their hospitality and hosted large lunches in my honour; for each one they slaughtered a lamb or a bull; the total number amounted to 301 lambs and 50 bulls. Guests from other sympathetic tribes came to visit me, and we continued with these meetings for two months.

How did you spend your time after your return?

In the mornings, I was concerned with inspecting the water and *qāt* projects in my village, which had multiplied during my absence.²¹ In the afternoons, I used to free up my time to receive the numerous guests and tribesmen in the *majlis* of my house. Because of my preoccupation with my tribe's issues, I was so busy that I did not see my own mother except by coincidence. When I came home at midnight or even in the middle of the night, my mother had fallen asleep. When I woke up at 9 o'clock in the morning, she had already left the house for the farm.

I used these daily gatherings at my home to solve their problems, and, with God's help, I solved more than sixty tribal disputes, some of them issues of revenge, and some of them issues of compensation for wounds and bodily injuries,²² as well as border and land disputes among my tribe. Sometimes I moved to the venues of the conflicts so as to assess the situation on the ground and judge rightly in their quarrels.

On the other hand, I exploited these daily gatherings in my *majlis* to instigate my tribesmen and visitors against Šālih and 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. I gave an interview for *al-Wasaṭ al-Yamaniyya* newspaper, in

21 The increase in water and agriculture projects in Sufyān can also be seen as a sign that Mujāhid's absence in fact ushered in a phase of stabilization and "normality" that replaced the state of emergency that had prevailed during the period before 1995.

22 On material compensations for bodily injuries in customary law, see Dresch 2006: 88.

which I talked about the detrimental policies of the regime, its deliberate neglect of many rural areas and its policy of fomenting internal strife among the tribes. We also wrote pamphlets inciting [people] against *bayt al-Aḥmar*; my tribesmen had these xeroxed and distributed them by the thousands in the Ḥāshid villages each night, all of which engendered a strong resonance.

The tribe of Sufyān gazed proudly on this scion of *bayt Ḥaydar*, when, in the mornings, and surrounded by members of his *qawm*, he left the house to take care of the daily needs of his tribe. From the afternoon until the late evening hours, his house was open to anyone, and when closeted in his *majlis* with his tribespeople and visitors, he showed himself a dedicated and experienced tribal leader, who listened carefully and resolved problems and disputes in accordance with the conditions of tribal customary law.

Again, he assumed his place at the head of the council of experienced elders and advisers well-versed in tribal law, who had taught him the subtleties of *ʿurf wa-silf* (tribal law and precedent) when he was a teenage boy following in his late father's footsteps. This team had run the tribe's affairs during his absence, and now they advised and supported him in his decisions. It was evident that Mujāhid was not one of those shaykh-bureaucrats, shaykh-entrepreneurs, or shaykh-politicians produced by the Ṣāliḥ regime, many of whom lived in mansions in the posh neighbourhoods of Sanaa, aloof and far from the everyday realities of their tribes. Mujāhid was a shaykh of the old kind, deeply rooted in the daily life of his tribe, whose sorrows and concerns he shared, since most of these problems also plagued him as well.

And with the energy he had regained by his long rest, he promptly got back on his feet again. Given his ambitious disposition and troublesome temper, he had long grown tired of the quiet life and inertia of exile. As soon as he had returned to his native environment, he was once again able to lead the tribal opposition to the regime, and with his usual ardour he flung himself into the environment of the skirmish and fray.

Again a chain of events began with a roadblock – similar to 1991 after Yemeni unity, on the occasion of the ambush of Ṣādiq al-Aḥmar. In June 2004, a few weeks after Mujāhid's return, Shaykh Muḥammad al-ʿAwjārī passed away in Wā'ilah in north-east Ṣa'da province. In Sufyān, Mujāhid and his men alerted their sentinels and carefully monitored the traffic on the highway, for they expected ʿAbdallāh al-Aḥmar to send one of his sons to attend the funeral and express his condolences to *bayt al-ʿAwjārī*, who had been bound in friendship to *bayt al-Aḥmar* since the national reconciliation (*al-muṣāliḥa al-waṭaniyya*)

of 1970. And indeed, in Sanaa Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar set off for Ṣa'da and shortly thereafter crossed the border into Sufyān.

When Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar's motorcade approached al-Mudarrij, we blocked the highway and made plain that we would not grant him the right to pass. Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar rallied a large number of Ḥāshid tribesmen and threatened to cross our territory by force. In response, I summoned the [rest of the] Sufyān, and we continued to block the highway and refuse his passage.

Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar then withdrew to the city of Ḥūth, where he met with Mujāhid Abū Shawārib and 'Alī Maqṣa', Ṣāliḥ's maternal uncle (*khāl*), all of whom had come to Ḥūth with the aim of convincing Ḥusayn to abandon his plan to cross our land. Supposedly, Mujāhid Abū Shawārib exhorted Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar not to tempt his fate by telling him, "If you insist on passing through Sufyān, Wādī l-Mudarrij will flow red with your blood. You haven't yet tasted the lead of Sufyān, as I did," because he had a bullet from Sufyān in his chest, and his father had been killed by the Sufyān.²³

They decided to dispatch a parliamentary delegation to Sufyān, however they were unable to convince me to lift the roadblock. Then the commander of Sufyān's Jabal Aswad garrison sought me out, and explained that 'Alī Muḥsin and Ṣāliḥ had called him and told him that it is of vital importance to bring me to Sanaa. I heard an undertone in his voice suggesting that Ṣāliḥ had issued an express command to bring me to Sanaa, if necessary by force. I could easily read the signs of a coming storm, and knew that the matter would soon be decided by arms. I refused to turn myself in, and hastily shored up as many tribesmen as possible, in order to be prepared for their attack.

Indeed the next day, at break of dawn, the Firqa attacked us with four brigades and four combat helicopters. We entrenched ourselves in a rugged area that was difficult for the army to access. When attempts at mediation continued to produce no results, they sent a man to our camp who pretended that he wanted to talk to me but, in truth, his mission was to ascertain, by reconnoitring, my precise position in order to attack and eliminate me. And indeed, the next morning a detachment of the

23 Here Mujāhid Abū Shawārib is referring to an incident that took place before the 1962 revolution, in which his father Yaḥyā had been killed by the Sufyān. This story, more specifically the Abū Shawārib version of it, is narrated in Khadija al-Salami's book (al-Salami and Hoots 2003: 228–233).

Firqa was sent as a vanguard trying to sneak into our camp and kill me in what became a kind of suicide mission, for we managed to counter their attack and killed and wounded a number of soldiers and set their armoured vehicles on fire, producing big plumes of black smoke that rose up into the sky and were widely visible in the highlands. The military leaders then offered to stop the war, in exchange for me allowing one of the helicopters to evacuate the dead and wounded. I resolved, then, to take my tribesmen to an even more inaccessible place. It could only be reached by foot soldiers via vertiginous mountain tracks that wound up steep gradients and around hairpin corners that their vehicles would have to negotiate in several stages, advancing and backing up to and fro before they could get around them.

At this point Ṣāliḥ intervened. He ordered the Firqa to stop the attack and reached out to some shaykhs of Dahm, the largest Bakīlī tribe in al-Jawf, who, upon his request, sought out Mujāhid in his mountain hideout and offered him their protection and guaranteed his safe conduct to Sanaa for face-to-face negotiations with the president. Yet Mujāhid's sense of the repetition – the murder of his father in 1987 after an interview with Ṣāliḥ, as well as the attempt on his own life in 1992, and the ambush by the military police in Sanaa in 1995 – prompted him to doubt his safety. The Dahm shaykhs eventually resolved his doubts by pointing out the existence of *awrāq mukhlwa* (“documents of brotherhood,” tribal mutual assistance pacts) between them and Mujāhid's father; these were still considered valid. In these *awrāq* (documents), dating back to the time of the NDF and the War of the Central Areas in the early 1980s, they had agreed with Aḥmad Ḥaydar on mutual support in the case of an army attack.²⁴ This eventually assured Mujāhid. When he arrived in the capital, he and his companions were told to meet first with the minister of the interior, Rashād al-ʿAlīmī, who would take them to Ṣāliḥ. At the ministry of the interior, al-ʿAlīmī tried several times to contact Ṣāliḥ by phone, but the president seemed unavailable.

Al-ʿAlīmī went to call the president, and returned with the explanation that Ṣāliḥ was busy for three days. He told me, “We want you, brother Mujāhid, to wait here in the *dīwān* of the ministry of the interior for three days, in order to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, we tell

24 On pacts of mutual assistance between tribes, see also Dresch 1989: 259–260; and Dresch 2002.

the people that Mujaḥid Ḥaydar is negotiating with the minister of the interior, because the Firqa attacked him, and he humiliated the Firqa by killing and injuring a number of soldiers and setting their vehicles on fire. And on the other hand, you are just waiting three days as our guest in our *dīwān* until the president finds the time to meet you.”

Mujaḥid's accommodation in the *dīwān* of the ministry of the interior seemed at first no more than a comfortable way to bridge the time he had to wait. He would have been far more concerned if he had been able to guess what machinations he was again surrounded by. Neither Mujaḥid nor the shaykhs of Dahm had an inkling that at the same time a second crisis in the mountains of Ṣa'da was about to become violent; this was the Ḥūthī crisis.

The roadblock in Sufyān coincided with the beginning of the campaign against Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī and his followers in Marrān, about 60 kilometres north-west of al-Mudarrīj (as the crow flies). This campaign eventually evolved into the first of six so-called Ṣa'da wars (*ḥurūb Ṣa'da*) between the Ḥūthīs and the government.²⁵ On 22 June 2004, as soon as the doors of the ministry of the interior had closed behind Mujaḥid, the Firqa moved from Sufyān further north to Marrān, trailed by the tribal-Islamist irregulars that were mobilized by Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar at the time of the roadblock in al-Mudarrīj, and that eventually became the nucleus of the Ṣa'da wars' so-called “popular army” (*jaysh sha'bī*).²⁶ Further Firqa units moved out of their barracks in the Tihāma lowlands and headed towards Marrān. General 'Alī Muḥsin pursued the campaign with his usual lack of scruples and bent on destruction, for the Firqa unleashed the full force of its arsenal of jets, helicopters, tanks, armour, and artillery to pound Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī and his followers, who were then few in number and lightly armed, in their mountainous hideout.

At the time, Ṣāliḥ was concerned with getting Mujaḥid out of Sufyān and away from the highway, to take him into custody. Ṣāliḥ believed it necessary to keep Mujaḥid under watch, to deprive him of the possibility of blocking the road or intervening in the battle and coming out in support of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī. In this way, he lured Mujaḥid to the capital and arrested him, with kid gloves, in the ministry of the interior. Mujaḥid was given special treatment, which he later indignantly referred to as “*dīwānī* detention” (*dīwān al-tawqīf*).

25 On the run-up to the first Ṣa'da war, see Brandt 2017a: 154–157.

26 From the fourth Ṣa'da war onwards, when it became clear that the regular army was ultimately unable to defeat the Ḥūthīs, the government began to systematically enlist these irregulars, particularly Ḥāshid tribesmen and radical Sunnis, into the so-called “Popular Army,” see Brandt 2017a: 228–237.

The Dahm shaykhs insisted on remaining at my side in what soon turned out to be my detention in the *dīwān* of the ministry of the interior. The shaykhs agreed that, as a visible token of their solidarity, every Bakīl tribe would send delegates to me on a daily basis, to spend the day with me in detention; the result being that every day around a hundred visitors arrived at the gates of the ministry. Annoyed about this steady stream, Ṣāliḥ asked al-ʿAlīmī to bar them from entry. Before long, I found myself separated from most of my companions. The doors were barred, guards were posted at the gates, and the ministry was surrounded by soldiers, lest my tribe should come to my aid. Moreover, Ṣāliḥ met with the shaykhs of Dahm and embarrassed them by demanding ten further days during which I would remain under duress. The Dahm shaykhs went home after informing me that they would return to Sanaa after ten days.

Mujāhid tried in vain to get word to his fellow shaykhs of Bakīl, but was kept under guard in the ministry of the interior. Meanwhile the Firqa continued to besiege, yet without much success, the mountain of Marrān where Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī had sought refuge, together with dozens of followers and family members, in the elevated caves of Jurf Salmān. Fighting also erupted in Ṣaʿda city, Ḍaḥyān, and Wādī Nushūr in eastern Ṣaʿda province, the latter being the home region of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī's close friend Shaykh ʿAbdallāh al-Razzāmī, who had stepped into action to distract the Firqa and thus take pressure off Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in Marrān.²⁷

Ṣāliḥ believed that I would take advantage of the situation by blocking the highway and preventing the Firqa and military reinforcements from reaching the battlegrounds in Ṣaʿda. Ṣāliḥ once accused me of having given the starting signal for the 1994 civil war by opening the battle at Sufyān's Jabal Aswad [in February 1994]. He said that Sufyān had been calm and trouble-free during my absence, and as soon as I returned from abroad, I agitated my tribe and again became a centre of disturbance. Later I learnt that the government suspected that I fraternized with Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in Syria and made common cause with him, but that was not the case.²⁸

You had never met him?

27 See Brandt 2017a: 158–159.

28 Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī is generally believed to have stayed in Syria for some time in the 1980s. So far there is no evidence that he travelled to Syria in the 1990s.

Not that I remember. But shortly after the first [Ṣa'da] war I met [Ḥusayn's half-brother and successor] 'Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī and two of his companions when they came incognito to Sufyān with our friend Shaykh 'Abdallāh b. Yaḥyā l-Qa'ūd [of Sufyān].²⁹ But I didn't find out who he was until later. At that time actually no one knew who 'Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī was.

Be that as it may, the fact is that after they lured me into the *dīwān* of the ministry of the interior, they closed the door on me and deployed the Firqa from Sufyān to Marrān, because Ṣāliḥ believed that it would not require more than ten days to get rid of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, and these were the ten days of my further detention, which he requested from the shaykhs of Dahm.

The ten-day period elapsed and the army was unable to achieve victory over Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī and his followers in their remote eyrie. After ten days, the shaykhs of Dahm returned to Sanaa, but Ṣāliḥ remained unavailable. Through the minister of the interior, he asked them to agree to a further period of one week. After that time, the Firqa had still not achieved victory and Ṣāliḥ stopped responding to the shaykhs' enquiries.

For the second time in his life, Mujāhid had become a hostage. Twenty-four years after Ṣāliḥ kept him as a child prisoner in the Qishla of al-Ḥarf, now, as an adult, he faced an eerie – albeit far more comfortable – re-enactment of the hostage situation. In near solitary confinement, and haunted by the spirits of the past, his mood grew darker by the day.

At last my patience was exhausted. Via a mobile phone that one of my tribesmen had smuggled into the *dīwān*, I summoned the Dahm shaykhs, who had guaranteed with their honour to support me and to stay by my side. I told them, "You have gotten me into this mess on your guaranty and on your honour, and now get me out of it again!" It was their duty to free me, since they were to blame for the fact that I was being kept under duress.

The shaykhs of Dahm stepped into action and blocked the roads in al-Jawf just when a number of military vehicles were on their way [to the secondary battleground in Wādī Nushūr]. In the ensuing confrontations, they killed a soldier and wounded another, and took one of the soldiers hostage with them to their villages. And as the government feared, my

29 See Brandt 2013: 132–133; and Brandt 2017a: 269–270.

tribesmen in Sufyān blocked the highway at al-Mudarrij and prevented the Firqa's reinforcements and supplies from reaching Marrān. Thus all direct routes to the battlegrounds in Ṣa'da were closed, and the Firqa would have to make immense detours by way of Ḥaraḍ.

ʿAlī Muḥsin then requested to meet with the headmen of my tribe. In their meeting, he threw his *barīha*, his military beret, at their feet, and asked them to open the road in Sufyān for ten days, and after this time-line I would be set free. This is a custom in Yemen, that you throw what is on your head at the feet of those concerned, that is, to humiliate yourself, your dignity (*jāh*) until you embarrass them and make them grant you your request. At last, the Firqa defeated the Ḥūthīs in Marrān, killed Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, and took his slain corpse to Sanaa. The day after, Ṣāliḥ ordered my release, without a meeting and without offering any solutions to our problems. In total, I was detained for almost six weeks.

The second Ṣa'da war, which started six months after the end of the first, witnessed a repetition of this pattern.³⁰ Again, Ṣāliḥ's principal concern was to keep Mujaḥid from meddling in the military campaign and possibly fraternizing with the Ḥūthīs. Thus, he redoubled his cajolery to lure Mujaḥid out of Sufyān as a means of temporizing and avoiding problems on the arterial highway. To this end, shortly before the Firqa set off to Ṣa'da to start the war anew, Ṣāliḥ called Mujaḥid on the phone, demanding to see him and to talk with him in the capital. Together with fifty well-armed bodyguards, Mujaḥid – who still hoped for concessions – went to Sanaa and took up quarters in a rented house on the arterial road to the north. Again, Ṣāliḥ asked Mujaḥid to wait while he looked into his demands. While Ṣāliḥ prolonged his procrastination, the Firqa moved to Ṣa'da for search operations in Wā'ilah and Saḥār, in order to arrest Badr al-Dīn and ʿAbd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī and dismantle the new Ḥūthī leadership.

At the end of the second Ṣa'da war, and after another nerve-wracking waiting period, Ṣāliḥ called Mujaḥid on the phone. Their telephone conversation revolved around the same old problems: Mujaḥid would not cooperate with Ṣāliḥ until the latter had met his demands involving sustainable communal development in Sufyān and the recruitment of his tribesmen into the government. Ṣāliḥ, for his part, was still only prepared to make selective, minor concessions, such as personal stipends that would not strengthen Mujaḥid's standing among his tribesmen, but rather cause him to forfeit his close

30 For the course of the second Ṣa'da war, see Brandt 2017a: 168–181.

connection to his tribal base and weaken him. Still, neither man would waive a single one of his demands.

Ṣāliḥ had promised to solve my problems and the problems of my tribe, and I would have liked to achieve that for the sake of my tribe, but Ṣāliḥ's motives were, as always, disingenuous. Our [telephone] conversation once again revolved around my demands for development and the enlistment [of my tribesmen], but we soon passed into [a state of] futile bargaining, followed by increasingly ugly mutual reproaches.

At the end of our conversation Ṣāliḥ said, with a solemnly derisive sort of laugh, "Your mind is stuck in the 1970s, when the shaykhs sought to forcibly impose their conditions on the state. But now the state is strong, and the shaykhs can no longer impose their will on it and push through their goals." After a brief pause, he added, "Provided you become a good citizen (*mawāṭin ṣāliḥ*), I will solve your problems."

I asked him, "And how do you define a 'good citizen'?"

He answered, "A good citizen is good for the state."

I laughed bitterly and said, "There won't be any good citizens left when you have turned everyone into subjects, and when you have made everyone loyal to you instead of loyal to the country."

Ṣāliḥ said something and then, without waiting for an answer, slammed the phone down. Seething with anger, I gathered my men and returned to Sufyān.

Ṣāliḥ was the president of Yemen, and the *mawāṭin ṣāliḥ* (the "good citizen") was Ṣāliḥ's idea of an ideal citizen. It was a pun on the president's name, and a euphemism for what less polite contemporaries would call *makhluq 'Afāsh* ("Ṣāliḥ's creature"). In the eyes of the president, he and the *mawāṭin ṣāliḥ* were the embodiment of the contemporary leader and citizen. In Mujāhid's efforts Ṣāliḥ saw nothing but a retrograde movement of thirty years earlier, a vestige of the early YAR, when tribal power and influence had their heyday and the shaykhs ruled the state almost at will. But now Ṣāliḥ held the reins of power firmly in his hands and Mujāhid, who apparently failed to keep up with the times, was fighting a hopeless struggle with the present. Deeply entangled in his romantic backwardness, Mujāhid was the champion of a cause that was already doomed to perish; the empty shell of an outlived tribal ideal.

3 A Terrible Entanglement (2006)

This ancestral tribal past was dead. For in the world of modern politics, Ṣāliḥ believed, practical realism invariably gained over tribal chivalry and faded ideals. Ṣāliḥ saw himself as the embodiment of the times; a role model of the modern Arab leader. Reigning at the apex of a hierarchy nested in concentric circles, he held the state firmly in his hands, with his sway extending into the various state authorities, finance and administration, ministries and military, police, security and prisons, universities and law courts, controlling the written and spoken and even – through a tightly-woven network of informants – the secretly whispered word.

In 2006, however, and after more than a decade of relative tranquillity, the situation again became volatile. The Ḥūthīs had become bolder; they rallied additional forces to their cause and sought to expand from their northern strongholds into the surrounding provinces. Many factors contributed to the deterioration of the Ḥūthī crisis, as tribal feuding, the emergence of a war economy, domestic political intrigues, foreign meddling, and the sectarian character of the war generated momentum on its own.³¹ After the first and second Ṣa'da wars brought about the defeat of the Ḥūthīs at the hands of military, the third Ṣa'da war was ended by mediation, followed by a contractual ceasefire. In other parts of the country, including the South and even in the capital, the regime faced a bout of public dissent.

These tensions came at an inopportune time. The presidential and municipal elections scheduled for September 2006 were imminent. In them, Ṣāliḥ wished to force through, once and for all, his long-term dynastic project and set the course for his son Aḥmad's succession. At that time, Aḥmad was head of both the special forces and the republican guard. Ṣāliḥ tried to delay his own departure from power and further extend his term in the upcoming elections until, in 2012, his son would be forty years old, the constitutional age for the president. Ṣāliḥ had already broken 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar's tenacious resistance to the changes in Yemen's neopatrimonial structures related to the battle for succession. Only Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar was still being obstructive, but ultimately he proved unable to prevent the rise of Aḥmad Ṣāliḥ towards the highest echelon of power.³²

The last obstacle to Ṣāliḥ's succession plans was General 'Alī Muḥsin. The general, whose rimless glasses and jovial smile belied his bent for outright

31 On the war drivers that developed in the interim phase after the third Ṣa'da war, see Brandt 2017a: 198–214.

32 Longley Alley 2008: 189–229.

brutality, had always been the sturdy pillar of Ṣāliḥ's power. He was Ṣāliḥ's relative, loyal acolyte, and most important general. As the commander of the North-Western Military Region, which embraced the northern highlands, his First Armoured Division (the *Firqa*) was in charge of the war in Ṣa'da. At the time of Ṣāliḥ's political ascent in 1978, and ever since, 'Alī Muḥsin had put his powers at Ṣāliḥ's disposal and served him devotedly. A bold and unscrupulous military leader, prepared for every eventuality, 'Alī Muḥsin's services were invaluable to the president. Many times, 'Alī Muḥsin had done the unpleasant work for him. 'Alī Muḥsin's only flaw (in the eyes of Ṣāliḥ) was that he had been, for decades, Ṣāliḥ's designated successor.

Ṣāliḥ and 'Alī Muḥsin were long-term allies, but also rivals, and from 2001 their rivalry had begun to intensify over the succession issue. Ṣāliḥ's succession plan for his son Aḥmad was a violation of an agreement called the "bond" or the "covenant" (*al-ʿahd*), which dated back to the late 1970s when Ṣāliḥ ascended to power, and according to which the elite of the Sanḥān tribe pledged to stand together under Ṣāliḥ and acknowledge 'Alī Muḥsin as his successor. The covenant began to erode in 2001 when the Sanḥān elite decided to declare Aḥmad Ṣāliḥ as Ṣāliḥ's presidential successor.³³ With this chess move, 'Alī Muḥsin, who naturally disapproved of the decision, became a threat to Ṣāliḥ and his plans.³⁴ This rift in the innermost circle of power did not manifest itself in open conflict, but rather, as so often happened, in underground intrigue and secret manoeuvrings. The steady expansion of the Ḥūthī wars provided Ṣāliḥ with a magnificent opportunity to keep 'Alī Muḥsin and the *Firqa* distracted in Yemen's North, diminish his reputation, and endanger his very life through brutal fighting; for the military campaign against the Ḥūthīs resulted in years of warfare, thousands of fatalities, and earned 'Alī Muḥsin the irreconcilable hatred of many highland tribes, whose backing was crucial to any ruler.³⁵ The Ṣa'da wars, hence, had to continue.

Circumstances seemed to arrange matters favourably for Ṣāliḥ. After again becoming bogged down in Ṣāliḥ's policy of temporizing that he had experienced so many times before, Mujāhid returned to Sufyān in a very ill humour. Ṣāliḥ's arbitrary and imperious conduct had struck him, and he was profoundly annoyed by the president's gleeful and derisive comments during their telephone conversation, in which he was accused of being permanently stuck in an obsolete past, the last faithful follower of antiquated tribal principles.

33 Longley Alley 2008: 87; and Philipps 2011a: 93–95.

34 Philipps 2011b.

35 Throughout the Ṣa'da wars, Ṣāliḥ seems to have refused to give 'Alī Muḥsin reinforcements, see International Crisis Group 2009: 15; and Philipps 2011a: 93–94.

Mujāhid and the members of his tribe agreed that this disdainful treatment was unendurable.

This was Mujāhid's perception of the status quo. After his return to Sufyān, his anger about Šālih's imperious conduct and policy of evasion continued to fester, and he soon found a reason to give vent in action. In 1987, after Mujāhid returned from his ill-fated second interview with Šālih, the Sufyān had provoked the war of Nūriyya. Now, in the aftermath of his latest telephone conversation with Šālih, Mujāhid and his advisers withdrew to the *majlis* of his house to think the situation through. After lengthy nocturnal discussions, the advocates of retaliatory action won out. They resolved to respond by applying the leverage where it would most – as they naïvely believed – hurt the regime.

We devised a plan, which aimed at banning the preachers of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were sent by 'Alī Muḥsin, from the mosques in al-Ḥarf. We mobilized our men, and at time of the *jum'a* [Friday] prayers, they went to al-Ḥarf, burst into the mosques during the service, and drove the Brotherhood's preachers out at gunpoint. That went on for some time.

Didn't the Muslim Brothers object?

Not really. There were no Muslim Brothers among the Sufyān because my father, may God rest his soul, entered into an agreement (*ittifāq*) with the [other shaykhs of] Sufyān in 1982 [at the time of the NDF] not to tolerate the Muslim Brothers and their ideology and to ban the “scientific institutes” (*ma'āhid 'ilmiyya*)³⁶ affiliated with them from the soil of Sufyān because the Brotherhood's thought was the thought of our enemy, 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. As such, the Muslim Brotherhood was alien to Sufyān. Though the Muslim Brothers complained of these breaches of the peace, and tried to persuade the local authorities and government to work on stopping these interruptions to the Friday prayers, on the whole they sat quietly in their houses until, at length, 'Alī Muḥsin responded and dealt us a hard blow.

One Friday, when my men were on their way to al-Ḥarf to drive the preachers out of the mosques, the Firqa set an ambush for them.³⁷ When they passed through an empty area called Qā' al-Ḥarf, all of a sudden, at a turning in the road, they spotted the barrel of a tank glitter from behind a crest: they had fallen into an ambush. The Firqa launched an

36 Through their scientific institutes, the Islamist movement established a parallel school system that was largely independent from the state and closely linked with Saudi interests in Yemen, see Bruck 1998: 156; Haykel 1999: 196–197; and Bonnefoy 2011: 155–157.

37 This incident occurred on 14 April 2006, and was widely covered in the Yemeni press.

armoured attack on them that left two of my men killed, among them my nephew ‘Abdallāh, and four others wounded. The Firqa’s soldiers, for their part, did not suffer any casualties because they were protected by their armoured vehicles. To make things worse, the Firqa took the dead and two of the wounded with them to the governor’s compound in ‘Am-rān city, where they dumped them in a yard without providing medical treatment. One of the wounded bled to death as a result. The plan was to use the bodies as a leverage in negotiations with us, in order to force us to pledge not to harass the Islamists and prevent their preachers from delivering their sermons in the mosques in al-Ḥarf.

In response, I gathered my tribesmen, about 400 men at arms, and summoned the other shaykhs and tribes of Sufyān, in order to find a common position and discuss the way forward; we discussed whether to attack the Firqa’s garrison in al-Ḥarf, or set a roadblock at the narrow [gap] of al-Mudarrij, or both. The whole tribe of Sufyān was in an uproar.

At this point, Ṣāliḥ stepped in. He called me on the phone and offered medical treatment for the wounded and said he would hand over the dead as a return favour for me stopping the confrontation and coming to meet him in Sanaa. “Mujāhid,” he said to me on the phone, “we each have cause to complain about the other, and I ask you to come and endeavour to clear up this affair.”

You accepted, albeit you knew that in all likelihood he would again deceive you?

Yes, because Ṣāliḥ had communicated in the media that he condemned the Firqa’s attack on us, and he provided fresh guarantees of safety and solutions, and at that moment, for my tribesmen the treatment of the wounded and the return of the deceased took supreme priority. I was under intense pressure and had a great desire to espouse the cause of my tribesmen and serve their interests in exchange for their loyalty. Their anger about the abduction of the wounded and the dead was really strong.

The Ḥūthī leaders, too, closely monitored the situation in Sufyān and in the media and likewise condemned the attack by the Firqa. At this juncture, and by a strange twist in the trajectory of events, Ṣāliḥ, Mujāhid, and the Ḥūthīs suddenly found themselves on the same side – and ‘Alī Muḥsin was on the other side. Once again the almost classic situation in Yemeni politics came into being, in which inherently disparate groups form transient coalitions to confront the same opponent, in a process of attraction and repulsion reflected by the Arab proverb the “enemy of my enemy is a friend” (*‘aduww ‘aduwwī ṣadiq*). For

Şālih, at any rate, the confrontation between the Firqa and the Sufyān engendered such a situation. For in spite of all their differences, there was one common element at the heart of the designs of Şālih, Mujāhid, and the Hūthis: they all loathed ‘Alī Muḥsin.

For many years Şālih had tried to make use of Mujāhid’s tremendous ability to bring about a revolt, so he could divert it, at the appropriate time, towards ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, but he failed to manipulate Mujāhid to this end. At this point in time, in summer 2006, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was no longer the focus of Şālih’s attention – he was focused on ‘Alī Muḥsin instead. In the al-Ḥarf incident, Şālih sensed a serendipitous opportunity to direct the violent thrusts of Mujāhid and the Sufyān towards ‘Alī Muḥsin. To this end, Şālih cast a rod with (he believed) irresistible bait hanging on the hook, yet still he was not fully ready to stir up deep waters and make substantial concessions.

Under the guaranty of Shaykh Qā’id Shuwayṭ, I headed to Sanaa to meet Şālih in al-Nahdayn presidential palace in order to sound out the possibilities of a compromise. In the conversation that followed, Şālih surprised me with a show of amicability. He even offered me the position of governor of Rayma province, but I rejected his offer. I told him, “It would flatter me very much to be a governor, but this is an honour I can do without. For it would be useless to be governor without having the authority to really develop the governorate, and eventually the people of Rayma would say that I did not do anything for them.”

Şālih said, “All right, I [will] appoint you *wakīl* of al-Ḥudayda governorate, and the people won’t say so because you are not the governor.”³⁸

I refused again. Then Şālih said, “Well then, I [will] make you a member of the GPC secretariat, and this is the highest body of the GPC.”

I replied, “I am not interested in being a member of the GPC secretariat. Rather I want you to provide development [aid] to Sufyān and recruit a number of my tribesmen in the armed forces and security apparatus and civil service, and pay salaries to the tribal elders in Sufyān.”

Şālih listened with utmost attention, and yet it was easy to see that my demands were not agreeable to him. He said, “All right, we [will] stop our

38 Şālih offered Mujāhid the post of *wakīl* (“deputy governor” or “sector head,” a high administrative position) of al-Ḥudayda province, which was generally much sought after, because the large Red Sea port offered lucrative income opportunities from trade, customs, and certainly also smuggling. Since 1962, a number of influential shaykhs from highland Yemen held this post, see e.g., Koszinowski 1978: 72.

dealings with those shaykhs in Sufyān, who were our partners, and [will] deal with you instead.”³⁹

I replied, “This is rather a matter of course and my natural right, which you have always deprived me of, and you owe me reparation. You might well believe that I will not accept such crumbs as these in exchange for those I am entitled to. Let me be frank: Without the implementation of my demands for communal development [in Sufyān] and the enlistment of my tribesmen [in the government and army], there is no basis for cooperation.”

Despite Ṣāliḥ’s surprising overture, their discussion, which had been proceeding for so many years, quickly returned to the same dead end. Mujāhid refused to succumb to Ṣāliḥ’s blandishments and rather clung to his agenda – a programme of communal development and the enlistment of his tribesmen, the same programme he had inherited from his father, from which he had never strayed. Ṣāliḥ, for his part, was only ready to make the usual non-committal offers and pseudo-concessions – selective and unsustainable concessions like personal posts and salaries for Mujāhid in exchange for his cooperation. Ṣāliḥ would readily elevate Mujāhid (and hence, even better, disrupt his close connection to his tribal base); yet he would neither strengthen Mujāhid’s standing among his tribe through the provision of communal benefits, nor would he allow unruly and potentially dangerous elements such as the Sufyān to gain a foothold in the apparatus of his state. Still there was this insuperable hitch in the dealings between them. Neither would waive any element of his demands.

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In the following months, Ṣāliḥ’s attention was fully focused on the presidential and municipal elections scheduled for 20 September 2006. In order to hold the elections, after the third Ṣa‘da war the conflict with the Ḥūthīs was put on standby. If the elections went well for Ṣāliḥ – and with his control of the government, this was almost assured – he would take a further step to shake off the control of his partners and push through his goal of hereditary succession.

While the conflict in the North went through an unprecedented period of détente, Ṣāliḥ turned his attention to the opposition forces, which had

39 Here Ṣāliḥ was referring to one of Mujāhid’s rivals, Shaykh Ṣaghīr b. ‘Azīz of Dhū Ṣumaym of Ruhm of Sufyān, who was close to Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and had a distinguished career as an officer attached to the republican guard, see Brandt 2013: 132–133.

reappeared on other domestic fronts. In the transitional phase after Yemeni unity, domestic opposition was debilitated, first by Ṣāliḥ's successes in the 1993 elections, and then by the military victory over the South in 1994. Now the changing fortunes of the country and the prospect of democratic presidential elections again brought out many repressed grievances, feelings of humiliation, and deep-seated resentment that had been present since the beginning of Ṣāliḥ's rule. The upcoming presidential elections spurred renewed efforts by the political opposition, since there seemed to be at last some hope for change.⁴⁰

The new spirit among the opposition manifested itself in the nomination of Fayṣal Bin Shamlān as an opposing candidate to Ṣāliḥ through *Aḥzāb al-Liqā' al-Mushtarak* (the Joint Meeting Parties, JMP), an uneasy association of five opposition parties (*Iṣlāḥ*, YSP, al-Ḥaqq, Unionists, and the Popular Forces Union). The JMP aimed to unite the opposition and effect political and economic reform in the regime that had by then almost "arrested" the state.⁴¹ During the period of the run-up to the elections, Ṣāliḥ worked to further fracture the JMP, particularly the *Iṣlāḥ* party, whose members (its Muslim Brother wing, in particular) he vilified publicly as "terrorists."⁴² The majority in the *Iṣlāḥ* party soon ceased to oppose the regime. 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, seriously ill with cancer and worn down by the political disputes with Ṣāliḥ over the question of succession, had left Yemen for Saudi Arabia in January 2006; supposedly, he had said that he would leave Yemen to Ṣāliḥ and his sons.⁴³ Ṣāliḥ also managed to bring (and without much effort) 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī in his camp; he was a central figure in *Iṣlāḥ* who became a key personality for the solidification of the Islamist pro-Ṣāliḥ bloc.⁴⁴ The only conflict-capable group

40 At this time, resistance against northern hegemony and the economic and political marginalization of the South was organized in the protest movement called al-Ḥirāk. Rather than solving the problem politically, here, too, the regime resorted to violence; this led, from 2008, to calls for the full secession of the South and the re-establishment of South Yemen as an independent state, see Dahlgren 2008; Dahlgren 2010; Day 2012: 227–233; and Augustin 2022.

41 The notion of "arrested statehood" goes back to Burrowes and Kasper (2007: 267). On the JMP (*Aḥzāb al-Liqā' al-Mushtarak*), see, for example, Browers 2007; Day 2012: 220–225; and Heibach and Transfeld 2017.

42 Longley Alley 2007: 246.

43 Phillips 2008: 164–165.

44 Schwedler 2006: 178. 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī was an influential religious scholar and one of the founders of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood (Schwedler 2006: 70; and Bonnefoy 2011: 76, 82). At the time of the 2006 elections, al-Zindānī became a key to Ṣāliḥ's attempts to court the Salafis in the *Iṣlāḥ* party, and to strengthen the Salafi movement in general (Longley Alley 2007: 246). According to Phillips (2011a: 103), President Ṣāliḥ expected al-Zindānī "to deliver his Salafi constituency when needed."

in Iṣlāḥ remained the Muslim Brotherhood wing. Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar threw in all his weight (and plenty of money) to mobilize the Ḥāshid tribes for Bin Shamlān's cause, but was unable to achieve much except turning Ṣāliḥ even farther away from *bayt* al-Aḥmar.⁴⁵

In the presidential elections, Ṣāliḥ was officially awarded 77 per cent of the vote on the national level, Fayṣal Bin Shamlān received 22 per cent.⁴⁶ The municipal elections also became a resounding success for the GPC, for Iṣlāḥ was “essentially massacred at the grassroots level.”⁴⁷ Riding the wave of his electoral success, shortly after the elections Ṣāliḥ personally visited Ṣa'da province, the home area of the al-Ḥūthī family, and even paid a visit to Marrān mountain, the remote eyrie in which Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī had persevered during the first Ṣa'da war, until his fatal end.

After the elections, the détente in Ṣa'da quickly eroded, and the Ḥūthīs and the government positioned themselves for a new round of war. A complex set of drivers had emerged, tensions were increasing, violations of the ceasefire ran rampant, and new skirmishes erupted.⁴⁸ The Ḥūthīs, bolder than ever, rallied their forces and sought to expand. This confusing situation brought many dangers and pitfalls, but also provided splendid opportunities for someone who knew how to deal with them. Ṣāliḥ had concluded from the lessons of the past that chaos and differences could always be exploited to push forward his plans. For a passionate strategist like Ṣāliḥ, this situation offered magnificent opportunities to try again to outmanoeuvre his foes.

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Mujāhid, for his part, was aware of the impending changes at the centre of power in the aftermath of the elections, but could not yet see Ṣāliḥ's plan. He knew that, in comparison to the 1990s, his interactions with the president had taken on a different quality. Where were the wrathful outbursts and vituperations, the tantrums, the murderous ambushes of the military police? When he was detained in the ministry of the interior at the time of the first Ṣa'da war, Ṣāliḥ had the power to crush him, and yet he had not done so. Moreover,

45 Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar agitated against Ṣāliḥ in the framework of the JMP opposition alliance and also tried, though without much success, to mobilize his tribal base in southern 'Am-rān for his cause, see Longley Alley 2008: 212–213.

46 On the 2006 elections, see Burrowes and Kasper 2007; and Longley Alley 2007.

47 Longley Alley 2007: 241.

48 On the driving forces of the war in Ṣa'da at the time of the interim phase between the third and fourth rounds of war, see Brandt 2017a: 198–214.

during the third Ṣa'da war, Ṣāliḥ had desisted from enticing Mujaḥid from Sufyān to the capital, lest he cause disturbances on the arterial highway. And most recently, if Ṣāliḥ had had his way, the Sufyāns' affronts against 'Alī Muḥsin and the Muslim Brothers would have earned Mujaḥid the post of governor of Rayma! Even the promise of becoming a member of the GPC secretariat was dangled before his eyes. For a mind as lucid as that of Mujaḥid, who had a keen instinct for changes in the political weather, this indulgence was a sign that the regime was distracted at this critical point in time.

Indeed Sufyān, and hence Mujaḥid, were particularly important to Ṣāliḥ's new plan. Sufyān was the gateway to Ṣa'da, and the tribe of Sufyān had a history of conflict with 'Alī Muḥsin. After the eviction of the Islamist preachers in al-Ḥarf, Mujaḥid's prestige among the Ḥūthīs had risen to dizzying heights, and Ṣāliḥ knew, rather than suspected, that the Sufyān were a prime focus of the Ḥūthīs, who sought to expand. Since Ṣāliḥ's interests required a continuance of the war in Ṣa'da, he considered it prudent to encourage both 'Alī Muḥsin and Mujaḥid to undertake additional provocations. To this end, Ṣāliḥ conceived a new manoeuvre, the purpose of which was to further deepen the enmity between Mujaḥid and 'Alī Muḥsin and to drive them to war without appearing to be the driving force behind the operation. Rather, he wanted a façade of innocence, to remain inscrutable and appear to be Mujaḥid's benefactor. Ṣāliḥ's new gambit was a masterpiece of manipulation.

After the elections, Ṣāliḥ called me on the phone and asked me to come and meet him; he even swore an oath that we would finally find a way to settle our problems. I told him that it is impossible for me to believe him, for in all our previous meetings I had encountered nothing but temporizing, lies, and empty talk.

Thereupon Ṣāliḥ instructed 'Alī Muḥsin to come to Sufyān, and to meet me and assure me that he would guarantee, on his honour, my safety and the fulfilment of my demands. I met with 'Alī Muḥsin in the government complex in al-Ḥarf. He took my hands in both his own and shook them softly while swearing a solemn oath that he would not betray nor deceive me. He told me that he was Ṣāliḥ's guarantor for the implementation of my demands, and he asked me to come with him to Sanaa to meet Ṣāliḥ and solve all my problems. This aroused my curiosity. I made up my mind that, for the sake of my tribe, I would go with him and learn what they had to offer.

In Sanaa, we found Ṣāliḥ in the best of spirits; he was all cordiality and amicability. He even surprised me with the gift of a brand-new Toyota Land Cruiser. "Oh, oh!" I thought. "He has never been so kind before. On

guard!" In our meeting in al-Nahdayn palace that lasted some two hours, Šāliḥ assumed the most agreeable air possible, and eventually asked me to wait in Sanaa to give him the opportunity to look into my demands.

Indeed, a few days later 'Alī Muḥsin was on the phone and told me, "Tomorrow we have an appointment with the president; in the morning come to the Firqa headquarters." The next morning, I went to meet 'Alī Muḥsin, and he took me with him to the presidential palace in al-Nahdayn. When we entered, Šāliḥ strode forward to meet us. After the exchange of greetings, he preceded into an ostentatiously furnished reception room, where he dropped into one of the armchairs and invited us to take seats also. We drank juice together, and after the exchange of some pleasantries, Šāliḥ rose from his chair. Casting a sidelong glance at 'Alī Muḥsin, he said, "I withdraw for a recess of about one hour for consultations with 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī and then [I will] return to you. And in the meantime you, Mujaḥid, discuss your demands with 'Alī Muḥsin and agree with him on solutions. And after you come to an agreement, I shall implement your demands."

Mujaḥid could hardly believe it: Šāliḥ had played the trump card, the card that he had always been careful to keep out of sight. Šāliḥ's leading ambition had always been to put Mujaḥid in his place and not make any concessions beyond personal posts and individual benefits. For the first time ever, he offered Mujaḥid, openly and firmly, to fulfil his demands. What Mujaḥid had for years been after, and what he strived to attain with skill, urgency, and pressure, was now almost within reach – or would have been within reach, if not for 'Alī Muḥsin.

While the reference to 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī waiting in the next room was spoken softly, it did not go unheeded by Mujaḥid and 'Alī Muḥsin. Al-Zindānī was key to Šāliḥ's attempts to court and strengthen Iṣlāḥ's (largely obedient) Salafī wing, at the expense of the (potentially rebellious) Muslim Brother wing, to which 'Alī Muḥsin and Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar were attached. Šāliḥ proceeded on the assumption that his private talk with al-Zindānī in the adjoining room, and the aura of intimacy and collusion with the Salafīs it inevitably conveyed, would be an excellent way to alert and slight 'Alī Muḥsin and to make him take a robust approach vis-à-vis Mujaḥid.

This very circumstance, coupled with Šāliḥ's spurious gaiety and his ambiguous, shrouded sort of talk, stirred in Mujaḥid wonder and apprehension. He was not likely to misconstrue Šāliḥ's generosity and sudden complaisance towards him; he knew that it was intended to camouflage Šāliḥ's real objectives, and wondered what it was all about.

After he left, I asked ‘Alī Muḥsin, “What is your opinion about what Ṣāliḥ told us?”

“First, speak the blessing of the Prophet (*ṣalli ‘alā l-nabī awwalan*),” ‘Alī Muḥsin said.

I replied, “May Allah bless our Lord Muḥammad and his family (*Allāh muṣalli ‘alā sayyidnā Muḥammad wa-‘alā ālihi*).”

‘Alī Muḥsin said, “Look, the words ‘and his family’ (*wa-ālihi*) are the point of difference between you and me.”

I said, “I can’t see what you mean. All of us in Sanaa and what is north of Sanaa habitually say the words ‘and his family.’”

“Well, we should talk seriously,” said ‘Alī Muḥsin, and drew his chair nearer to my chair. “Today we are chewing *qāt* together, only you and me, at my place at the Firqa headquarters, and I will make you understand.”

By making Mujāhid say the *taṣliyya* (the invocation of God’s blessing upon the Prophet Muḥammad), ‘Alī Muḥsin had set the direction of the impending bargain. He knew that Mujāhid, as a tribesman from the Zaydi-dominated northern highlands, would automatically add *wa-‘alā ālihi* (“and his family”) to it, and by this (intentionally or not) he was invoking a key tenet of the Ḥūthīs (and of Ḥādawī Zaydis in general) that insists on righteous rule through the *ahl al-bayt* or *sāda* (the descendants of the Prophet), as it had been practiced in imamic Yemen prior to the revolution. Since 1962, by contrast, Yemeni republicanism sought to underpin its legitimacy by espousing religious doctrines that do not recognize the supremacy of the *sāda*, that is, Sunnism in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism in particular. By pitting one doctrine against the other, ‘Alī Muḥsin intended to force Mujāhid to show his true colours and choose sides in the war between the Firqa and the Ḥūthīs.

I went with ‘Alī Muḥsin [to the Firqa headquarters] and chewed *qāt* with him, stuff of superb quality, and he kept me next to him in his *majlis* the whole afternoon. With nightfall, when the *qāt* had brought us to the state of euphoria (*kayf*), he eventually rose from his seat, extended his hand to me, and asked me to go down with him to the basement under the *majlis*. It was filled with the religious books of the Muslim Brotherhood.

He put some of these books in my hand and said, “People told me that you are a reader. Please, read these books. And send groups of your tribesmen to me, one by one, so that we recruit them here and under your leadership. I have come to appreciate your resolution; and our cooperation might be very advantageous to both of us. Come, reflect, and decide.”

I was startled because I knew this game, and what was likely to come next, and I sought to evade his request by telling him, with an embarrassed air, “Well, it is very difficult to recruit my tribesmen and to make them leave their *qāt* farms [i.e., to fight with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Popular Army], because nowadays their *qāt* farms generate a lot of revenue. But if you come to Sufyān and recruit them at their homes, it might work out.”

He said, with the tinge of a threat, “Is that to say, you refuse to accommodate me, brother Mujāhid? Let me be clear, I want you to send them to me, one by one.”

I said, “Very well then, give me time to discuss this with my tribesmen and [I will] send you their answer.”

We left the basement, and before we parted ‘Alī Muḥsin said, “We shall meet again, shall we not, brother Mujāhid?”

“An opportunity will come,” I answered.

I began to understand that Ṣāliḥ wanted something and ‘Alī Muḥsin wanted something else, and each of them wanted to win me over to his side. I heard in Ṣāliḥ’s words a new tone. Ṣāliḥ knew that I would never come to terms with ‘Alī Muḥsin, and he wanted ‘Alī Muḥsin to be the bogeyman and scapegoat for the obstruction of every solution, in order to incite my wrath and push me into the arms of the Ḥūthīs, because at that time Ṣāliḥ thought that supporting and strengthening the Ḥūthīs indirectly [might help him] get rid of ‘Alī Muḥsin, and get rid of the Ḥūthīs at the same time, at each others’ hands. It was Ṣāliḥ’s custom to ally with four to get rid of the fifth, and then join forces with three to get rid of the fourth, and so on; and now the ultimate goal was to get rid of ‘Alī Muḥsin. Ṣāliḥ was a dangerous and dirty man in all his criminal acts.

‘Alī Muḥsin did not yet seem to be fully aware of what was going on. ‘Alī Muḥsin most wanted to win me over to his side and absorb my tribe into the Islamist militias; he made the fulfilment of my demands dependent on me joining his Muslim Brothers and fighting alongside the Firqa as a commander of a tribal Islamist auxiliary force in order to defeat the Ḥūthīs.

Was partnering with ‘Alī Muḥsin an option for you?

Impossible. Cooperation with ‘Alī Muḥsin was utterly unthinkable. ‘Alī Muḥsin had always been our enemy. He was ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar’s right hand in crushing us with the Firqa’s forces, and always has been, before and after Yemeni unity, and he was responsible for countless punitive campaigns going to Sufyān. This man reeked of carnage. He should have known that I am an enemy to him and to his Muslim Brothers, and that

we could never overcome the enmity between us. He insulted us so cruelly that between him and me [there] will always be war to the death.

At last, Mujāhid knew what Šāliḥ wished to achieve. After he had marginalized ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar and his sons, he sought to clear his path of General ‘Alī Muḥsin, to remove the last rival and serious resistance to the succession of his son. To this end, Šāliḥ intended to exploit the chasm between Mujāhid and ‘Alī Muḥsin, by pitting them against each other and thus using them to hold the other in check. He himself would wash his hands of responsibility. He had abandoned the decades-long dispute about Mujāhid’s demands by entrusting the bargaining to ‘Alī Muḥsin, whom he knew to be a selfish and zealous mediator. From that point on, ‘Alī Muḥsin became responsible for finding ways not to implement Mujāhid’s demands, for ‘Alī Muḥsin made concessions dependent on Mujāhid and his tribesmen joining the Muslim Brothers and the tribal-Islamist auxiliary forces in the war against the Ḥūthīs. ‘Alī Muḥsin had made it plain to Mujāhid that going forward there was no middle way, and that he had to choose between the Islamist auxiliaries and the Ḥūthīs.

Šāliḥ knew that Mujāhid loathed ‘Alī Muḥsin, that he detested the Muslim Brothers, and that he was involved in a blood feud with ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, whose son Ḥusayn had played a leading role in rallying the tribal-Islamist auxiliaries, whom ‘Alī Muḥsin now wanted him to join.⁴⁹ Since reaching a common understanding between them was impossible, Šāliḥ anticipated that a military escalation between the Firqa and the Sufyān would follow suit, in which case, the Ḥūthīs would rush to the aid of the Sufyān. Effectively, this would begin the Ša‘da wars anew, the Firqa would become further embroiled in tribal feuding, and ‘Alī Muḥsin’s reputation would continue to deteriorate in the morass of the Ša‘da wars. And naturally the Sufyān tribe, to him an odious “pack of rascals,” would emerge from the confrontation significantly weaker.

All of this forebode disaster. As if sensing this, Mujāhid, generally courageous and eager to fight, hesitated to enter into this new confrontation. He understood full well that a further escalation lay ahead, one that went far beyond the occasional hassles and exchanges in which the Firqa and the Sufyān had engaged. The Firqa’s easy success after the eviction of the Islamist preachers in al-Ḥarf had once again exposed the Sufyān’s vulnerability and inferior matériel and depleted military forces, and revealed the enormous superiority of the Firqa, whose strength clearly and substantially surpassed the Sufyān’s

49 On this so-called “popular army” (*jaysh sha‘bī*) consisting of tribal and Islamist forces, see Brandt 2017a: 228–237.

potentialities. The punishment that ‘Alī Muḥsin had inflicted on the Sufyān was nothing compared to the retaliation he would inflict should Muḥjahid refuse his proposition for cooperation. The violent death of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in the caves of Jurf Salmān and the public display of his mutilated body in the media stood as an example of the fate that likely also awaited Muḥjahid, as ‘Alī Muḥsin would take personal revenge on a shaykh whose partnership he had sought and failed to win over.

Ṣāliḥ had finally succeeded in putting Muḥjahid into a position known as a “forced move” – when there is just one possible move for a player –, in order to push the Firqa and the Sufyān into conflict. And perhaps the worst aspect for Muḥjahid was that the looming confrontation between the Sufyān and the Firqa was brought about by Ṣāliḥ’s machinations and would ultimately play into his hands. At last, and through Ṣāliḥ’s ingeniously simple chess move, he had fallen into the trap set for him by the president, a strategist who saw two, three, or even four moves in advance.

Disconcerted and uneasy, if not positively frightened by this outlook, Muḥjahid deemed it best to quit the game altogether, to withdraw and consult with his tribesmen, and explain to them that he would not allow himself and his tribe become entangled in such a scheme. Again, he made the most prudent choice someone in his situation could make – he stepped to the side, avoided open confrontation, and took refuge in flight.

I returned to Sufyān, gathered the elders of my tribe in my house and related to them what had taken place between me and Ṣāliḥ and ‘Alī Muḥsin. I told them, “Listen, the regime will not give us our rights except in exchange for us becoming embroiled in its wars and shedding each other’s blood. We have powerful adversaries, and if we do not take great heed, they will destroy us. Therefore, it seems to me that it is best for us if I leave Yemen again, so that we can avoid this dirty war. And during my absence you should take care only about yourselves and your farms; and if there is any hothead among our tribe who wants to fling himself into the fray, then see to it that he fights alongside the Ḥūthīs against the cursed regime in Sanaa, regardless of the fact that the Ḥūthīs are even more wicked than the regime.”

I bade farewell to my family and tribe and returned to Sanaa, and at the airport, before embarking on a plane, I called Ṣāliḥ and ‘Alī Muḥsin on the phone. I told them, “I am traveling abroad, and I warn you, if you don’t accept my demands to solve our problems and the problems of my tribe, then be sure that all those who are with me from my tribe and elsewhere will come out in support of the Ḥūthīs, and that they will destroy

all of you, out of revenge against you and your regime, because you never solved any of our problems. I repeat my warning: If you really want to solve our problems, then do it now, or you will have to live with the consequences. After you have abused us with such effrontery, eventually we will laugh at you with those whom you wished us to kill.”

What did they answer?

I actually don't recall if they answered at all. I admit that at last my patience with them failed me, and then I became blunt. I felt that I had to do some plain talking to them, and I was not in the mood for further discussions, rather [I had reached a] shouting mode. I only recall Ṣālīḥ saying at the other end of the line, perplexedly, and with a tone of vexation, “All right, but do not stay abroad for long.”

Mujāhid left Yemen for Syria in November 2006. Once more, he was washed into the abyss. His second exile had begun.

4 A Floating World (2006–)

In this study, I have often argued that Mujāhid and his tribe presented a kind of integrated whole, for throughout the years of his shaykhdom, Mujāhid's outlooks and designs remained consistent with the morale at the grass roots level of his tribe. During his tenure as shaykh, Mujāhid was never detached from his tribe in the political, economic, and denominational sense, nor did he ever seek to administer his tribe from afar (as did the “city shaykhs” or “absentee shaykhs” that were epidemic in republican Yemen). His rootedness in and his symbiotic connection with his tribal base were also reflected by his smooth cooperation with the team of elder counsellors from his tribe, who after the untimely death of his father had introduced him to the subtleties of tribal law and Sufyān's intra-and inter-tribal relationships: a knowledge that became vital in the decades of ruinous conflict with *bayt* al-Aḥmar and the regime. Where great decisions were concerned and in certain exceptional situations, Mujāhid's counsellors also helped protect him from himself, against his own impetuosity and dark temper. Therefore, it is almost impossible to disentangle Mujāhid's personal merits and achievements from those of the collective around him; moreover, the renown of his name among the Sufyān included the names of his counsellors and some of his *qawm*.

The course of events in Sufyān after Mujāhid's second escape into exile seems to support this view, for during his absence his tribe continued to pursue and implement his agenda. In November 2006, after Mujāhid was forced

to dismantle his life almost overnight and leave again for Syria, his tribe followed his advice and continued to pursue the conflict with ‘Alī Muḥsin and the Firqa separately from the Ṣa‘da wars. Mujaḥid’s departure, as the figurehead of the opposition, undoubtedly reduced pressure on the Sufyān. During the fourth and fifth Ṣa‘da wars, the Sufyān continued their customary policy of roadblocks, thereby hindering the Firqa’s access to the battlegrounds in Ṣa‘da and frustrating Ṣāliḥ’s plan to eliminate ‘Alī Muḥsin by combining the efforts of the Sufyān and the Ḥūthīs.

Ṣāliḥ’s policy towards ‘Alī Muḥsin and the Ḥūthīs was a clear (yet, in fact, not the first) indication of his incipient loss of contact with reality. From the beginning of the war with the Ḥūthīs, Ṣāliḥ had grossly miscalculated how strong the Ḥūthīs were, particularly with the many tribes who defected to them. The Ḥūthī threat required joint, resolute action by the government and armed forces, yet, Ṣāliḥ created havoc and increased friction in the innermost circle of power. Moreover, the protracted roadblocks in Sufyān perplexed Ṣāliḥ, since he had not considered that they might frustrate his plans to get rid of ‘Alī Muḥsin. Concerned that his entire plan would founder, Ṣāliḥ sent envoy after envoy to Mujaḥid in Syria, trying to persuade him to return to Yemen and stop his tribe from blocking the highway. As expected, the negotiations (at Mount Qāsiyūn Restaurant and the Cham Palace Hotel in Damascus) produced no results, for Mujaḥid requested that Ṣāliḥ carry out his demands before he returned to Yemen, while Ṣāliḥ, as usual, insisted that his demands would only be implemented after Mujaḥid’s arrival. The failure of the negotiations in Damascus must be seen in light of the controversial question of whether Ṣāliḥ seriously sought an agreement with Mujaḥid or whether he was just bent on opening the road for ‘Alī Muḥsin to proceed into the Ṣa‘da inferno and accelerate his demise.

After the fifth Ṣa‘da war, when Mujaḥid’s replies in Syria remained negative, Ṣāliḥ made every effort to increase tensions by rekindling the ancient territorial conflict between the Sufyān and the al-‘Uṣaymāt in the area of al-Suwād, with the goal of exhausting the Sufyān and distracting them from the highway.⁵⁰ Moreover, he did everything he could to make Mujaḥid’s situation in Syria uncomfortable. The then Yemeni ambassador to Damascus, an Islamist, forwarded a dossier on Mujaḥid to the Syrian government, whereupon the Syrian secret service repeatedly arrested and interrogated Mujaḥid and temporarily confiscated his passport.

⁵⁰ Brandt 2017a: 263–270, 282–285.

After ten months of feuding between the Sufyān and al-‘Uṣaymāt in al-Suwād, the sixth Ṣa‘da war set in, and the Sufyān resumed their policy of roadblocks. It became more and more obvious that Ṣāliḥ had badly miscalculated the situation, for the Sufyān were just slowing down the campaign in Ṣa‘da instead of accelerating ‘Alī Muḥsin’s destruction. At last, Ṣāliḥ decided to do away with ‘Alī Muḥsin by other means. Shortly before the end of the sixth Ṣa‘da war, Ṣāliḥ tried to have ‘Alī Muḥsin killed by giving the Saudi air force that had at that point also entered into the war, the coordinates of a military base where ‘Alī Muḥsin was staying during the last round of fighting. But even this attempt to eliminate his last rival failed.⁵¹

In January 2011, the popular “Arab Spring” protests reached Yemen, resulting in Ṣāliḥ’s further loss of control and deterioration of the situation. The upheavals made it clear that Yemen was full of dangerous subterranean currents. Along with the Ḥūthīs in the North and the southern protest movement, called al-Ḥirāk, innumerable sources of opposition, which the regime had only suppressed but never fully eliminated, (re)appeared. At this most volatile point in time, the remarkable gullibility of ‘Alī Muḥsin towards Ṣāliḥ came to an end. ‘Alī Muḥsin defected to the protest camp, and the dangerous divisions in the nucleus of power further expanded, and the innermost circle of the regime (that is, Ṣāliḥ’s extended family) finally split into two feuding factions: the ‘Aḫṣh clan (those related to Ṣāliḥ) and the Qāḍī clan (those related to ‘Alī Muḥsin).⁵² The Qāḍī clan was suspected of being behind the assassination attempt on Ṣāliḥ in June 2011 (when an explosive device was planted inside the mosque on the presidential compound in al-Nahdayn). This Yemeni-style “Operation Valkyrie” left Ṣāliḥ injured but not killed; nevertheless, his days as the president of Yemen were over; he was forced by the GCC initiative to resign in January 2012.⁵³ Yet strategists like Ṣāliḥ never give up as long as they still have a move. At this juncture, Ṣāliḥ reversed course and began to cooperate

51 See also Day 2012: 218; and Brandt 2017a: 213–214.

52 Phillips 2011b.

53 The 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative aimed to stabilize Yemeni politics after the turmoil of the Change Revolution. In November 2011, the power transfer deal mediated by the GCC forced Ṣāliḥ to resign and regulated the temporary transfer of the presidency to former vice president ‘Abd Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Ḥādī, in return for domestic immunity for Ṣāliḥ. A UN-sponsored implementation document outlined a transition roadmap that included three principal tasks, including the holding of a National Dialogue Conference (NDC), see Carapico and Yadav 2014; and Wilson 2014. On the NDC, see Gaston 2014; Schmitz 2014; Bruck 2017: 269–272; and Brandt 2018.

openly with the Ḥūthīs and facilitate their campaign against his political enemies (who were then also the enemies of the Ḥūthīs).⁵⁴

The Sufyān, along with many other highland tribes, were driven by denominational considerations and tribal antagonisms, and above all the policy of common enemies and goals; ultimately, they joined forces with the Ḥūthīs.⁵⁵ In the beginning of 2014, these combined Ḥūthī forces brought large swathes of northern ‘Amrān province under their control. During their advance southwards, many Ḥāshid tribes in southern ‘Amrān aligned with them, for the Ḥāshid were likewise divided: one part was loyal to ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, ‘Alī Muḥsin, and the Muslim Brothers, while the other part was loyal to Ṣāliḥ and the GPC, and consequently sided with the Ḥūthīs.⁵⁶

In ‘Amrān, the dual thrust of the Sufyān and the Ḥūthīs developed into a murderous force; this enabled the Sufyān to follow through with a good part of their retributive agenda. The city of Ḥūth was the first to fall, then came Khamir and al-Khamrī in al-‘Uṣaymāt, all strongholds of *bayt* al-Aḥmar, whose ancestral home base (a large mansion with several outbuildings, watchtowers, and horse stables, surrounded by high concrete walls) was located in al-Khamrī. As the combined Sufyān-Ḥūthī forces advanced on al-Khamrī, the sons of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar evacuated the compound, loaded their belongings on trucks and fled to Aden.⁵⁷ The Dhū ‘Aybān,* who had relocated from Sufyān to al-Khamrī during the blood feud with *bayt* Ḥaydar in the late 1980s, also left in haste. After seizing the compound of *bayt* al-Aḥmar, the combined Ḥūthī forces blew it up, thus imposing the customary punishment of “uprooting” (*iqtilā*) those who are considered to have committed treason.⁵⁸ The detonations destroyed the main building, the outbuildings, and even the stables. Local press likened the demolition of the ancestral home base of *bayt* al-Aḥmar to the “fall of the Pharaohs,” and wrote of the “end of a historical era.” Video footage of the explosions showed the tribal and political hegemony of *bayt* al-Aḥmar in highland Yemen going up in white smoke.⁵⁹

The downfall of *bayt* al-Aḥmar was in fact almost complete. They lost their ancestral home base in al-Khamrī and most of their political influence,

54 On the alliance between Ṣāliḥ and the Ḥūthīs, see Nevola and Shibani 2020.

55 A notable exception was Ṣaghīr b. ‘Azīz, who was a protégé of both Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar; the Ḥūthīs had expelled him from Sufyān after the end of the sixth Ṣa‘da war in 2010, see Brandt 2013: 133–134; and Brandt 2017a: 328.

56 Barakish Net 2014; Alhawyah 2014; and International Crisis Group 2014: 8–9.

57 Alhawyah 2014.

58 On the practice of “uprooting” (*iqtilā*), see also chapter 2.

59 Albayan 2014; Almasdaronline 2014. See also Bruck 2017: 274–275.

material wealth, and tribal clout. The destruction of this ambitious family also played out in the realm of genealogy and descent. During his heyday in the 1970s, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar used to boast that his lineage descended from Companions of the Prophet and that he was related to the ancient noble family of al-Ḍaḥḥāk, the medieval “lords” of Ḥāshid.⁶⁰ Now, after the downfall of *bayt* al-Aḥmar, unkind compatriots jeered at the conceit of what they perceived as a “genealogical digression” and undue self-ennoblement. Public opinion challenged the family’s “legends” and identified ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar as the descendant of an army commander of possibly Albanian origin, who in the sixteenth century CE, at the time of the first Ottoman occupation, came to Yemen with the Ottoman governor Sinān Pasha, and later married a daughter of Mabkhūt al-Ḍaḥḥāk – hence the lineage was only “Yemeni” via the matriline. Later he adopted, because of his pinkish complexion, the name al-Aḥmar (“the red one”).⁶¹

Likewise, during the upheavals of Yemen’s Change Revolution, public opinion began to challenge the descent of ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ, whose last name, ‘Afāsh, took on a life of its own. Throughout his tenure he had spared no effort to keep the names (and even pictures) of most members of the regime’s inner circle out of the public realm, and his own last name, ‘Afāsh, was treated as though it were a state secret. According to Phillips, the name ‘Afāsh revealed that Ṣāliḥ did not come from a respected tribal pedigree, that he was a commoner, a non-entity who came to sit upon the president’s chair. Moreover, the name also revealed that General ‘Alī Muḥsin was in fact above Ṣāliḥ in the Sanḥān tribal hierarchy.⁶²

60 In the film *The Fortress of Intrigues* (*La Forteresse des Intrigues*), Verhaegen reproduces al-Aḥmar’s claim that his ancestors were Companions of the Prophet, and later helped to conquer al-Andalus where they built a palace bearing the family’s name (it remains open to interpretation whether or not he is referring to the Alhambra).

61 See *Taiz News* 2014. In his memoirs, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar only goes as far back as ‘Alī b. Qāsim al-Aḥmar in the eighteenth century, explaining that the “leadership” (*za‘āma*) of his ancestors over the Ḥāshid was old, but that he had no complete historical documentation on this, see al-Aḥmar 2008: 45. For a summary of the history of *bayt* al-Aḥmar since ‘Alī b. Qāsim, see Dresch 1989: 203–207, and passim. Glaser observed on his travels through highland Yemen in the nineteenth century that the highland tribes regarded other tribes, especially those under Turkish rule, with “downright strange disdain.” In addition, “the more venerable the lineage of a shaykh looks, the more respected the shaykh is,” see Glaser 1884: 171, 175. These genealogical deconstructions typically correspond to changes in power relations, for the negation of tribal origins is a serious insult in Arabia, where tribal populations are proud to flaunt their ancestry, see al-Rasheed 2018 on similar allegations towards the amir of Qatar’s ancestry, and Samin (2015) on the importance of genealogy in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

62 Phillips 201b.

From al-Khamrī, the combined Ḥūthī forces advanced on the city of ‘Amrān, held by Firqa units under the command of Brigadier General Ḥamīd al-Qushaybī, a Muslim Brother who had led countless punitive campaigns in Sufyān and who had been at the forefront of the six Ṣa‘da wars against the Ḥūthīs. The city of ‘Amrān and al-Qushaybī also fell victim to the lethal combination of forces that had united at this point against *bayt* al-Aḥmar, ‘Alī Muḥsin, and the Muslim Brothers. At this point, the combined forces included Ḥūthīs, Ṣālīḥ, disaffected tribes, and (in the background) an incompetent interim president Hādī, and the Saudis who decided to remain passive and distance themselves from the ‘Amrān battles that basically amounted to a mass expulsion of the Muslim Brothers.⁶³ The fall of ‘Amrān sent strong aftershocks rippling through the country. The Ḥūthīs seemed utterly transformed and self-assured, spreading panic among yesterday’s arrogant victors. In a tempestuous process that lasted only a few weeks, they continued their expansions southwards and made their entrance into Sanaa on 21 September 2014.⁶⁴

Since September 2014, the Ḥūthīs ruled supreme in the northern parts of Yemen. ‘Alī Muḥsin escaped to Saudi Arabia, where he assumed a key role in the Saudi-led military campaign against the Ḥūthīs; this began in spring 2015 (and enabled him to continue once again, and now almost without check, his primal bent for destruction). Eventually Ṣālīḥ, too, proved unequal to the Ḥūthīs. To the Yemeni people, Ṣālīḥ had long appeared almost like an invincible fate. Then the Ḥūthīs reduced him to a junior partner, and then (when Ṣālīḥ made another reversal and threatened to switch from the Ḥūthī to the Saudi camp) to a power that could be conquered. Certainly Ṣālīḥ would have wished to stage his final act in a more grandiose manner. His catastrophe and ignominious descent, hunted down and killed like prey by the Ḥūthīs, demonstrated without doubt that he was spent, abandoned by most of his followers and wholly drained of his once imposing abilities.

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During this time, and in comparison to the sweeping successes of his tribe, Mujāhid’s fate in exile proved less fortunate, particularly with regard to his quest for a powerful patron, political ally, and affluent sponsor. A promising

63 On the Ḥūthī advance on Sanaa, see also International Crisis Group 2014. The narrative of the film *The Road to Sanaa* by filmmakers Karman and al-Moliky, both close to the Iṣlāḥ party, gives ample testimony of the Muslim Brothers’ consternation and bewilderment about their “deception” by political elites.

64 International Crisis Group 2014; and Brandt 2018.

alliance with Libyan leader Colonel Mu‘amar al-Qadhāfi materialized, yet abruptly ended in 2011 when al-Qadhāfi perished in Libya’s civil war.⁶⁵ From 2011, Mujāhid watched the course of Yemen’s “Change Revolution,” to which so many hopes had been attached, with increasing disappointment. Like most Yemenis, he was aghast when none other than General ‘Alī Muḥsin, along with the sons of ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, the Salafis, and the Muslim Brothers arose at the centre of the opposition, thus “hijacking” the revolution and destroying its credibility, for even the most temporary alliance with the infamous members of the old regime utterly compromised the meaning and ethics of the protest movement.

In early 2015, a Ḥūthī envoy sought him out and offered to build a golden bridge for his return to Yemen. The Ḥūthīs knew full well the value of that shaykh, and what resources his presence, activity, and influence might offer them. In the name of ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī, the envoy invited Mujāhid to return to Yemen, and offered to appoint him to any position he wished; as minister, or even as a member of the Ḥūthīs’ Revolutionary Committee. Yet these cordial overtures did not last; after a brief period of rapprochement, and after Iran began to meddle, they fell out, and eventually Mujāhid revolted with all the energy of his passionate soul against any cooperation with the Ḥūthīs. They parted with lasting disagreements.⁶⁶

Now all paths and channels leading back to Yemen seemed barred, and his heavy exile began. From Syria, Mujāhid moved to Cairo, where he lived for a while. From Cairo, he relocated to Khartoum. Later he moved on to Addis Ababa, then to Dar es-Salaam, to Nairobi, to Kampala, and eventually to Hargeisa in Somaliland (it was in serene Hargeisa that we began to cooperate on this book in earnest). While he dragged his embitterment from country to country, unable to take root and establish himself anywhere, over time

65 Al-Qadhāfi had already backed the Nasirist coup against Šāliḥ in October 1978, see Peterson 1982: 124–125; Burrowes and Schmitz 2018: 339. At the time of the Ṣa‘da wars, al-Qadhāfi was pursuing an underground campaign against the Saudis and sought to coordinate with dissident shaykhs in Yemen in order to cause trouble in the Saudi-Yemeni borderlands and destabilize the kingdom, see Brandt 2017a: 208–210. The partnership with al-Qadhāfi was highly lucrative for Mujāhid and elevated him from destitution to a (short-time) millionaire. With the Libyan money, in 2012/13 his family built a villa on the Shāri‘ al-Khamsīn al-Shamālī (Northern Fifty Meter Road) in Sanaa. The fact that Mujāhid himself never set foot in this house is certainly one the many oddities of his life. On 29 May 2015 a coalition air strike reduced it to a heap of rubble. Pictures of the ruin can be seen on Getty Images.

66 This period is relatively well documented. In the seven months of rapprochement with the Ḥūthīs, Mujāhid gave over 30 TV interviews, many of which at the time of writing could still be retrieved on YouTube.

he reached a troubled state of mind – a “land of no return”⁶⁷ – in which an exile lives in limbo between worlds, “in the formless time of exile, a time with no future and a past suspended out of reach.”⁶⁸ With the passage of time, he seemed to fall into oblivion among his compatriots in Yemen. Sometimes it seemed to him as if no one, apart from his tribe, was waiting for him; no one, except for his own tribesmen, bothered about him, no one wanted anything from him, no one asked him for advice or help. Instead, the Ḥūthīs invested heavily into his younger brother Fayṣal, who proved more cooperative and amenable to their interests and rose from being Ḥūthī military commander of the Sufyān axis to become (in 2018) governor of al-Maḥwīt, then (in 2021) governor of al-Jawf. For a long time Mujāhid found it difficult to believe that the Yemeni people regarded him with such indifference; him, the great adversary of Ṣāliḥ, ‘Alī Muḥsin, and ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar. Gently, time left its mark upon him. Age began to touch him, the hair at his temples began to turn grey, his general appearance slowly assumed a ponderous aspect. Soon, old age would catch up to him, and life would have passed him by.

Meanwhile, Yemen fell prey to gruesome devastation. The war altered the spatial configuration of once-unified Yemen, and divided the country into parts governed by various factions that fought each other bitterly. In the wake of these political and spatial reconfigurations, millions of Yemenis shared Mujāhid's fate and became, likewise, displaced.⁶⁹ Some sought refuge in the eastern parts of the country that seemed less afflicted by the war. Others – politicians, traders, influential shaykhs – had better options and connections and fled abroad, where they, too, found themselves exposed to the multiple ruptures of exile.⁷⁰ The dismemberment of Yemen's former political geography and the resulting delocalizations and deterritorializations reformulated place and space as fluid and fragmented. While Yemen further descended into a war that fundamentally changed the country known to them, they entered the “floating world” of refuge, a space “beyond or above politics, and beyond or above history – a world in which they are simply ‘victims.’”⁷¹ This floating world, characterized by dislocations and multiple ruptures, was a deeply dehumanizing environment for many refugees, even as they found shelter in it.

Along with many other Middle Eastern countries, Yemen seemed to enter a state of liminality, the kind that Mujāhid had felt since his first exile in Syria in

67 Sayad 1996: 10.

68 Ignatieff 2001: 9.

69 As of December 2020, there were more than 3,500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs).

70 See, for example, Poirier 2022 on GPC elites exiled in Cairo.

71 Malkki 1995: 518.

1995, with the exception of his two and a half ill-fated years in Yemen between 2004 and 2006. Liminality denotes a state of transition between one stage and the next, a quality of ambiguity, especially between major life stages, a time when individuals no longer hold their former status but have not yet begun a transition to a status that may come after the liminal stage. Now the entire nation of Yemen was transformed into a liminal entity. The process began with the upheavals of the 2011 Change Revolution that had aroused so many hopes among the people, and that seemed to herald the dawn of a new age in the country's history, a time in which radical questions were asked and new ways of thinking appeared. In van Gennep's original concept, however, liminality is a time-limited state to which there is an entrance and an exit, and a "ceremony master" who guides participants through it.⁷² For the Yemeni nation, liminality became a permanent state, and no one knew a way out, there was no ceremony master to guide the country back on track, and the future remained utterly uncertain. Liminality, rupture, disintegration, and dislocation shifted from being individual and temporary phenomena to permanent and pervasive characteristics that eventually became a "form of life."⁷³

With the passage of time, Mujāhid's destiny that had overflowed with passion became uneventful. What could one hold on to in a floating world? Which certainties could provide an anchor, a semblance of continuity? The major themes of his life became a kind of driftwood amidst the indiscriminate flow of events, and he clung to them in the midst of the shipwrecks around him. The ancient feud with *bayt* al-Aḥmar was such a theme, his cold and enduring hatred was all the more virulent because the balance between *bayt* Ḥaydar and *bayt* al-Aḥmar was never restored. Forty years of fierce hostility sometimes binds people more closely together than a commonplace friendship, and his desire for vengeance still had a powerful, sombre, and searing effect on him that had not lessened over the years.

We shot over the graves of my brothers Ḥaydar and Ḥāmis, because we consider them avenged. But we did not yet shoot over the graves of my brother Ḥasan and my father. [Parity was never restored] because we do not accept those who have been killed in revenge for them.

I wanted the head of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, but I did not succeed. And after he died a natural death, I shifted my focus to these sons of his, regardless of the fact that they inherited neither the status nor the genius

72 Van Gennep 1909.

73 Das 2016. For liminality affecting a whole nation, see also Bayart 2007.

of their sire. I stopped pursuing his sons after the rift opened up between them and Šāliḥ in 2011, lest my killing them would serve the interests of Šāliḥ. I granted them a respite (*muhlah*) to slay each other, and whoever is left of them is for me [to kill].⁷⁴

And in the end Šāliḥ was killed, and Ḥamīd and Ḥusayn [al-Aḥmar] were forced to leave Yemen. Only Šādiq [al-Aḥmar] stayed behind, but now he is a weak and wretched person. We could kill him with ease, but our customs and values prevent us from doing so, because he has lost his strength, and our chivalry (*shahāma*) does not allow us to kill those who are weak and powerless (*lā ḥawl lahum wa-lā quwwa*).... I wait and see. I can resume the pursuit of my revenge, or remain patient until the situation [for taking revenge] improves.

Still there was a further theme that bound Mujāhid to Yemen, and at the same time prevented his return. For it must never be forgotten that, however powerless and isolated he seemed to be in exile, he was still a principal shaykh of the Sufyān, and had been an outstanding figure in his tribe since he was a teenage boy following in his late father's footsteps. He knew that upon his return to Sufyān the call to action would be unavoidable. For the very reason that he bore an ancient name and was a principal shaykh of Sufyān, his position would make a difference to the course of the war in the northern highlands, for the political faction that would win his support might win power as well. Yet Mujāhid detested all parties to the conflict equally. Wherever he looked, he saw exaggeration and religious fanaticism, and he, the intractable anti-fanatic, desired neither to serve one form of excess nor the other. He himself was his only master, and his sole focus was on the interests of his tribe, the Sufyān, and the confederation of Bakīl. He avoided aligning himself with any group, and was firmly determined to independently serve the cause to which he had dedicated himself and his life, that is, his tribe. In the present situation, he was reluctant to throw his weight and agency into the current parallelogram of powers. He would not rally his tribe to one side while the balance still trembled, and he would not incline the pointer in one direction over another.

I am outside Yemen, I am not comfortable – you find me moving from country to country, squandering my time and energy until the moment comes for my return to Yemen. For I cannot remain outside Yemen, even if I enjoyed all the comforts in the world. I cannot leave Yemen and my

74 On the deferment of a blood debt for a specified period of time, see also chapter 3.

tribe forever and abandon the role and social status that my father and my forefathers bequeathed to me through their bitter struggles and sacrifices.

I could go home at any hour, I am not banned, not proscribed. But I am a man of war, and known as such, and my standing among my tribe would be diminished if I returned to Yemen and didn't lead my *qawm* to war and defend the homeland on one of the fronts. And if I returned to Yemen and went to war, I would lose a large number of my tribesmen on the fronts, who have already suffered to an unacceptable degree. And in the end, our defence of the homeland would be a defence of the Ḥūthīs, and I do not want to sacrifice my tribesmen for the defence of the Ḥūthīs.

Hence I am waiting outside Yemen until the war is over. When the war is over, this will be my window of opportunity to return and rally the Sufyān and the tribes of Bakīl and all those who have been wronged, and to draw them away from the hands of the Ḥūthīs, in the name of neutrality. And in this way we will set things right. For the sake of Yemen, we will give [back to] the tribes the leverage to solve Yemen's problems and re-establish the state, order, law, security, equality, and stability. But this is a matter [that requires] generous financial support, and we do not have that support.

The tribes surrounding Sanaa and in the provinces north of Sanaa are those who loosen and bind, and have thus governed Yemen since time immemorial. Sometimes they supported an imam, and sometimes they overthrew him and brought another imam to power. In 1962 Yemen became a republic, but the leverage remained with the tribes; they brought *qāḍīs* to power and then deposed them again until it was Ṣāliḥ's turn.⁷⁵ And after Ṣāliḥ betrayed the tribes, many of them abandoned him and defected to al-Ḥūthī, and brought al-Ḥūthī to power in Sanaa. And the largest of these tribes is [the confederation of] Bakīl, whose number of warriors exceeds one million men at arms. Imagine, if we united the tribes of Bakīl and [those] who are with them, we would rule in Sanaa. This is my vision for Yemen, because I am Bakīlī, and Bakīl is the history of all change.

75 Here he is referring to Ṣāliḥ's predecessors 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Iryānī, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, and 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Arashī, all of whom hailed from renowned *qāḍī* families and took on the role as "wheels" of the government after the *sāda* lost influence, see Peterson 1982: 99. 'Abdallāh al-Sallāl, however, the first republican leader of the YAR, was an "ordinary" tribesman, like Ṣāliḥ.

Some Final Thoughts on Tribes, Politics, and Passions

This book records the life story of the shaykh of Sufyān, Mujāhid Ḥaydar and contextualizes his personal narrative in the anthropological, political, and historical frameworks of his time. Its aim is to reveal and explain the determining factors behind the chain of events that contributed to his life, and thus render the trajectory of his life story and personal destiny comprehensible and plausible. It demonstrates the way Mujāhid's resistance strategy is embedded in the politics and local specificities of northern highland Yemen, and it explains how his agency is informed and sustained by the cultural and social order in which he grew up and in which he operates, those local social rules, practices, and assumptions that he deeply internalized. Likewise, it tries to fathom what room for manoeuvre was left to him after the murders of his father and brothers, while also taking into account the limitations of his agency. These individual conditions, along with the supra-individual influences of his time, contribute to shaping the "transcript" of his personal agency: his "proud refusal" of and resistance to a regime that he regarded as unjust and oppressive. In the process of narrating his life story, three main determinants of his agency and his resistance strategy come to the fore: the tribal matrix, the political framework, and his own personal and affective disposition.

Mujāhid's narrative privileges the issues of tribalism, which he himself described as a "holistic system (*niṣām mutakāmil*) governing in our areas." These are the social rules, practices, and assumptions informed by the morality, customs, and traditions of *qabyala*. The tribal matrix includes imaginations of descent and genealogy, which in turn shape conceptions of kinship, belonging, solidarity, group cohesion, and fragmentation along descent lines, and the understandings of *ʿaṣabiyya*, the emotional bond between the members of a clan or a tribal community as well as their willingness to stand together in the face of outsiders. The recourse to the imperatives of *ʿaṣabiyya*, along with the consideration of tribal notions of territory and its special iconic significance in the moral system of the tribes explain the importance, and gravity, of the ancient territorial conflict between the Sufyān and al-ʿUṣaymāt, and how it resonates with tribal notions of honour that are seen as fixed, that cannot be compromised. A further element is the ancient struggle for predominance between the Ḥaydar and al-Aḥmar families informed by inter-tribal rivalries and territorial conflicts of longue durée: a struggle that from 1981 onwards assumed the character of a tribal blood feud. Tribal customs and procedures

determine the sequence and course of the feuding process; that is, the legal evaluation of the feud-related homicides according to the rules of tribal customary law and the setting of the penalties, the decision of whether moral balance can be restored and the blood debt can be settled by the payment of “blood money” (material compensation), or only by “blood taking” (killing the murderer or one of his agnates), the determination of the vengeance groups (the groups responsible for exacting revenge), as well as considerations of compatibility and equivalence between the original victim and the revenge target, which depend on multiple factors such as the latter’s kinship relations and tribal affiliation, social status, and position in the tribal society. In addition the very “style” in which the act of vengeance is to be performed is determined by tribal custom: it must not target persons considered “vulnerable” or “weak,” there is a hunting element, the act itself should appear swift and effortless and should (in terms of method) effectuate a show of blood, and after the deed is done the avenger(s) must not conceal their identity. Finally, the considerations of whether “parity” and “balance” between the two feuding groups have been restored or whether the agnates of the (slain) murderer insist on retaliating again against the original victim’s kin, and so on. The entirety of the feuding process is informed and regulated by tribal law and custom. Notions of tribal honour determine the morality of this process, and revenge and feuding are considered legitimate ways of enacting justice and restoring moral balance.

Tribalism in itself is, however, insufficient to explain Mujāhid’s agency and the trajectory of his life. Neither Sufyān nor any other area where tribalism is still prevalent can be viewed as Yemen’s “Zomia,” and there are no simple Khaldunian binaries of states and enemies of the state.¹ Rather, Mujāhid’s account demonstrates how tribal politics bleed into the domain of the state and are intertwined with it – such that neither can be comprehended independently from the other. Tribal representations and the issues of tribalism are constantly mediated by the fields of political power in which they circulate and through which they eventually obtain their shape. The massive political challenges the Sufyān and *bayt* Ḥaydar confronted throughout history – and this distinguishes the situation in Sufyān from those tribes in more peripheral

1 The term Zomia denotes areas used as a refuge for people in flight from state-making projects. James C. Scott coined the term as a name for an area that includes the highlands of Southeast Asia in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and some Indian and Chinese peripheries. For centuries, these areas were used as a refuge for people in flight from state-making projects, who came to form “a vast state-resistant periphery,” see Scott 2009. The idea of tribes and states as dichotomous entities is espoused by Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddimah* written in the fourteenth century CE.

locations – are also a result of the strategic importance and location of their territory, which has long attracted the special attention of Yemen's rulers. We find evidence of this in historical documents and correspondence with the imams that are held in the Ḥaydar family archive, as well as in recent history during the 1960s civil war and the tumultuous process of state building in the 1970s. Beginning in the late 1970s, in the War of the Central Areas, the troubled relationship between the Sufyān and President Ṣāliḥ led to the emergence of a situation marked by mutual mistrust, a situation that had a sustained negative effect on the relationship between the Sufyān and the Ṣāliḥ regime and made the tribe a preferred target of Ṣāliḥ's politics of divide and rule. For it was clear that Ṣāliḥ could only win over the Sufyān – along with many other highland tribes – if he confronted isolated opponents, and that he could not succeed if confronted by a united front.

Since his violent death in 2017, Ṣāliḥ's rule (1978–2012) has come under increasingly critical scrutiny, and his regime is harshly criticized with regard to its corruption, dysfunctionality, and neoliberal agenda; here the analyses of Sarah Phillips, Lisa Wedeen, Stephen Day, Helen Lackner, Isa Blumi, and Ginny Hill stand out.² Mujāhid, viewing the regime from the bottom-up perspective of one of its victims, further challenges Ṣāliḥ's credibility and legitimacy. Mujāhid's account gives ample testimony of the fact that Ṣāliḥ's politics of divide and rule and “conflict administration” (*idārat al-ṣirāʿ*) took on particularly reprehensible forms in Sufyān. Mujāhid provides us with an intimate insight into the policies employed by Ṣāliḥ and the consequences they have had on the tribe of Sufyān. A particularly repellent case in point is the manufactured internal conflict between *bayt* Ḥaydar and the Dhū ʿAybān* in the 1980s, through which the regime managed to eliminate Mujāhid's brothers Ḥaydar and Ḥāmis and eventually also his father. Here the regime's approaches involved sophisticated methods of manipulation, including gaslighting practices and callous stratagems that ultimately succeeded in corroding the tribe of Sufyān from within and inciting its segments against one another. The fact that the perpetrators involved in the murders of Mujāhid's brothers and father were subsequently recruited as officers in the army and police as a reward further blurred the line between what was tribal and what was political. Advocates of Ṣāliḥ and his government often argue (*mutatis mutandis*) that “the shaykhs loved Ṣāliḥ because he did not interfere in their affairs in their home constituencies.” Yet Mujāhid's account shows that many tribes did not love Ṣāliḥ, that

2 See Phillips 2008; Phillips 2011a; Wedeen 2008; Day 2012; Lackner 2017; Blumi 2010; Blumi 2018; and Hill 2017.

Šāliḥ did interfere in their internal affairs, he did so in a substantial way, and how he did it. By carrying out his designs indirectly, and without exposing himself and his regime in person, his policies brought out the worst features of tribalism and purposefully exacerbated them.

Šāliḥ's approach of divide and rule and fabricated crises in the northern highlands had repercussions that went beyond the realm of politics and became deeply ingrained in society. On a societal level, it encouraged a stabilization of role models, notions of leadership, and forms of masculinities shaped by the prevalent moral economy of violence. Before 1962 leaders' role models and images of masculinities were formulated along genealogical ties to venerated religious figures, and the masculine ethos of Zaydism had an explicit idea of what leadership and masculinity entailed, with the focus being on the nobility and purity of blood lines, religious erudition, and fighting prowess; that is, the ability to fight for a righteous cause (the Zaydi principle of "commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong").³ After 1962, images of masculinity and leadership in relation to the exercise of political authority were transformed. Zaydi notions of leadership and masculinity (based on religious erudition and descent from the Prophet) became an anathema and the focus shifted towards a "hegemonic masculinity" (in Connell's term) that was oriented towards the officers and the shaykhs, many of whom had positions in the army.⁴ Since 1978, and until his death in 2017, Šāliḥ's attempts to retain power by encouraging instability, infighting, and permanent crises strengthened and preserved notions of military leadership and forms of masculinity that were often increasingly uneasy and anachronistic, and contrary to more "modern" and contemporary models of "emergent masculinities" (the term coined by Isidoros and Inhorn) in the Arab world, including Yemen. The model of "emergent masculinities" questions dominant notions of "traditional" Arab masculinities and shifts focus on new forms of male agencies and new moral worlds in larger familial, community, and national structures.⁵ Masculinity is a relational concept, and Mujāhid's agency and notion of masculinity were produced in a specific setting and shaped by relations of alliance, dominance, and

3 The Quranic requisite of *al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar* (commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong) is a core principle of Yemeni Zaydi doctrine, see Madelung 1965: 163–164; Cook 2000.

4 The term "hegemonic masculinity" was coined by Raewyn Connell (1993 and 1995). By drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Connell emphasizes the significance of "multiple masculinities" that explain men's hegemony over women as well as hierarchies and inequalities among men themselves.

5 Cf. Isidoros and Inhorn 2022.

subordination with other men.⁶ Mujāhid became shaykh at a very young age, under horrific circumstances, and his life is thus marked by social suffering, danger, and resistance to an all-powerful regime. Consequently, in his narrative his role in his moral world is almost always that of “threat” or “instigator” or “thorn in the side” of the powerful. His role as mediator (a central task of shaykhs) is only touched on in passing, like something that is too obvious and commonplace to dwell on. Likewise, his narrative, which privileges resistance to an oppressive regime in a war context, largely obscures other “registers of manhood,” such as everyday gender relations and his role and agency as a son, husband, father, friend, in which he interacts in daily, domestic life in a way and on a level fundamentally different from his dealings with the regime. As discussed in the introduction, for reasons of privacy and cultural sensitivity, Mujāhid requested that I exclude his private life from the published account; therefore, with regard to gender roles, the account at hand is selective and does not present a holistic picture. The inclusion of these registers of manhood in private everyday settings would have given a different picture: that of a loving and caring son, husband, and father, one whose struggles ultimately served to improve the living conditions of his family and his tribe (in terms of development, education, enlistment, political empowerment). His efforts were, as we have seen, constantly thwarted by Ṣāliḥ.

As the story builds, we witness how Ṣāliḥ’s policies brought out and encouraged some of the most problematic aspects of tribalism; this certainly contributed to the public’s negative perception of tribes. Even worse, Ṣāliḥ’s imperious authority obscured his true identity as a strategist, whose use of manipulation was the means of choice to implement his rule. We witness how Ṣāliḥ, by nature a gambler, played with Mujāhid and continually tried to exploit him for his purposes through the same approaches and arguments. Even for the observer, the dynamic conjunction of threats, flattery, (empty) pledges, coercion, and lethal force Ṣāliḥ applied are appalling and confusing, and many of his targets might well have been deceived by his empty promises. Notably, when it came to governance in rural highland Yemen, Ṣāliḥ apparently lacked a vision of how to politically legitimize his authority. Inclusive participatory politics, accountability, engagement with demands for justice, trust, reliability, rational and sound relations, any kind of quiet authority seemed to be fundamentally alien

6 Recent research emphasizes the social malleability of gendered role models in general and masculinity in particular, as they appear in changing socio-economic and political conditions, see e.g., Ghannam 2013. There is an abundance of scholarship on the impact of experiences of war and violence on male identity, see, for example, Peteet’s essay (2000) on male gender and rituals of resistance in the Palestinian Intifada.

to him. Sarah Phillips wrote that “crisis has kept the system running, and has been, to a significant degree, a deliberate choice by Yemen’s power elite”; today this view is widely shared in scholarship.⁷ Indeed, until literally his last days, Ṣāliḥ encouraged his subjects and partners to feud over positions, and ridiculous issues of rank and access. Seen from the vantage point of Mujāhid and the Sufyān (along with many other disadvantaged tribes and groups), one gets the impression that Ṣāliḥ had no principles at all, no vision, no idea of sound leadership. Throughout his tenure, Ṣāliḥ did not coin a single memorable phrase, apart from “we are all tribesmen” (which they were not), and the “dance on the heads of snakes,” a trope which was borrowed from Imam Aḥmad, that paragon of tyranny, who said, “You don’t understand that I am sitting on a nest of snakes and scorpions, and you will see what happens once I am gone.”⁸

It is by no means clear whether Ṣāliḥ ever really recognized the ruinous effects of his style of leadership, because he carried on with it until he himself fell victim to its consequences. In his autocratic hubris, Ṣāliḥ even worked to tie his own destiny to the destiny of the Yemeni republic. Despite the pseudo-democratic, neo-patrimonial, and neo-liberal elite rule he introduced into Yemen, he worked to stylize himself as a symbol of the 1962 September revolution; that is, a symbol of republicanism.⁹ In presenting himself as the embodiment of the revolution and the republican state, he labelled his supporters “good citizens” – recall his telephone conversation with Mujāhid (in 2005) that revolved around the issue of the *mawāṭin ṣāliḥ*. He discredited his adversaries, calling them enemies of the republic and the revolution and hence traitors to their country. By doing so, he fabricated a considerable moral dilemma for critics and opponents of his regime, a dilemma that was informed by a complicated complex of psychological barriers and moral inhibitions. While in other countries one’s moral and national duty in resisting oppressive governments coincided almost completely (this was also, albeit phrased differently, Mujāhid’s argument in their telephone discussion in 2005), in Yemen these norms clashed sharply, because of the general conflation between Ṣāliḥ and republicanism. For a good many of those who were opposed to Ṣāliḥ’s regime this contradiction remained insoluble. This is one of the reasons why, until 2011, the history of the Yemeni opposition to Ṣāliḥ’s regime has remained an inglorious saga about scruples, contradictions, and mix-ups, for throughout

7 Phillips 2011a: 12. For a similar interpretation, see e.g. Blumi 2018: 142–169.

8 As quoted in Bruck 2005: 56.

9 See also Bruck, Alwazir, and Wiacek 2014: 305; and Orkaby 2022. For the telephone discussion between Mujāhid and Ṣāliḥ in which they discussed the issue of the *mawāṭin ṣāliḥ*, see chapter 6.

their years of resistance, most members of the opposition seem to have been unable to overcome the last emotional barrier of this moral dilemma.

Biography in anthropology and the social sciences is mainly concerned with contextualizing an individual's agency in its social and political environments. A social biography usually claims a certain degree of representativeness; that is, it aims to extrapolate something general from the individual. In the present case, however, the extra-personal determinants – the sociopolitical environment, the tribal matrix, the influence of macropolitics – are insufficient to fully explain Mujāhid's agency and the trajectory of his life. A social biography's claim to representativeness reaches its limits when personal elements come into play: subjective experiences and what one understands of them, character traits, emotions, and affective life.¹⁰ The case at hand presents evidence of the fact that individual action and an individual's capacity for resistance cannot be explained solely through social and political conditions, regardless of how much these may be considered determining factors.

A set of questions still remains to be answered: why, for example, did many other highland shaykhs, including some of the rather disaffected confederation of Bakīl, cooperate smoothly with Šālīḥ, some of them even betrayed an obsequiousness toward Šālīḥ that resembled the hysterical emperor veneration in Heinrich Mann's satirical novel *The Loyal Subject*? What sets those shaykhs apart from Mujāhid? Mujāhid's lifelong defiance towards Šālīḥ and the rejection of his regime stand in stark contrast to a politics of compliance and everyday forms of collaboration that were much more common among the shaykhs than Mujāhid's uncompromising, almost singular resistance.

For example, when looking at the sociopolitical environments of Mujāhid Ḥaydar and his nemesis and antipode 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, similarities rather than differences are immediately obvious. Both were tribal leaders of outstanding talent and personality, and both were exceptionally gifted. Both belonged to the tribal society of 'Amrān province, their tribes are neighbours, both hailed from renowned and politically important shaykhly lineages, both were inordinately ambitious, both were trained from earliest childhood for their future roles. Both were hostages in their childhood, both became shaykhs after the ruler of the day murdered their fathers. In both cases, the murder of the father by the respective regime put them into a position known as a "forced move," as from that point on their political choices and options were greatly limited. In the case of 'Abdallāh al-Aḥmar, the assassination of his father by Imam Aḥmad

10 For possible anthropological avenues to approach the complex role of emotions in social life, see also Beatty 2019.

forced him into the republican camp and so he adopted a lifelong policy aimed at disempowering the descendants of the former rulers (the *sāda*) and promoting Sunni Islamism. In the case of Mujāhid Ḥaydar, the assassination of his father led to his life-long determination to confront the Ṣāliḥ regime and *bayt* al-Aḥmar and to ally himself with their political enemies. These experiences and motivations were continually at work in the thinking and being of these two shaykhs and led to an early ossification of their political outlooks; ideas already espoused by their fathers persisted, even in their very phraseology, throughout their lives.

In other respects, they were totally dissimilar, and each had a distinctive way of coping with his respective challenges. ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar was a practical realist, a calculating individual who won his victories by way of shrewd (yet not always fair) manoeuvring, and who pursued the darker parts of his agenda far from the limelight of the public. He understood the trends of the epoch, he possessed the talent to look ahead, and he was able to recognize the new forces transforming the political and sectarian landscape. He found special (yet not unanimously agreed upon) ways to negotiate tribalism with modernity, and he was successful in the area of “transformative capacities,” that is, he knew how to draw resources from the wider sociopolitical and economic arenas and to participate in decision-making processes. During the tribulations of the 1960s civil war, in which his political camp (the republicans) happened to emerge victorious, ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar brilliantly and quickly rose to power, greatness, and gained significant wealth, and dignities and honours were showered upon him until the end of his life.

Mujāhid’s life, by contrast, began and remained laden with disaster and catastrophic events, and he continued to live a dangerous and precarious existence. Whereas the success of the republican camp in the 1960s catapulted ‘Abdallāh al-Aḥmar into the lofty spheres of national power, the assassination of his father in the late 1970s forced Mujāhid into opposition to a regime, then embodied by Ṣāliḥ and al-Aḥmar, that remained a dominant and nearly all-powerful factor throughout his tenure as shaykh. Immediately following the death of his father and his assumption of the office of shaykh, Mujāhid (at the age of fourteen) found himself in a constellation that compelled him to use all his mental and physical strength and to mobilize all the resources of his tribe. At the beginning of his shaykhdom the worst came to the worst, and his life remained a succession of emergencies, despite some transient relaxation and phases in exile.

The perilous situation, in which constant watchfulness was required and mistrust was a rule of survival, engendered a rejection of the dominant spirit of the times, a rejection that had far-reaching consequences for his status. Yemen

at the time of his main tenure as shaykh (1987–1994) shows certain resemblances with the “house society” Shryock and Howell describe in their work on the incorporation of shaykhs in Jordanian political systems. Likewise, Yemen under Ṣāliḥ was never a “tribal republic” (as Ṣāliḥ suggested) but rather a neo-liberal patrimonial state in which a configuration of elite families competed for rank, influence, wealth, and access to national offices and resources. These elite families included influential shaykhly and *qāḍī* houses, military and merchant dynasties, which, however, did not exclude the rise of individual commoners – after all Ṣāliḥ himself was one of these “climbers.” Martha Mundy is correct when she argues that power on the national stage did not necessarily grow out of tribal morphology, and likewise Mujāhid’s tribal rank as senior shaykh of the Sufyān did not guarantee political influence.¹¹ Mujāhid, affected by the horrific events of the 1980s, remained unwilling to adapt to the realities of the regime’s “house politics” and rather chose to remain “ever a stranger in the house,” that is, one who counteracted his family’s loss of power with a haughty refusal and tales of heroic opposition. Consequently, house politics only generated exclusion, social conflict, poverty, and disadvantage for him. He never managed to obtain political office in state politics, and wealth remained a fluid substance that slipped through his fingers. Through his narration, we come to understand the decades of suffering he and his family experienced, and the effect on him, as a boy and adult, seeing his mother and sisters and female relatives passionately mourning their grandfathers, fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, cousins, many of whom met violent deaths. From here, much of Mujāhid’s behaviour becomes understandable: his stubbornness and inflexibility, his intransigence often bordering on hatred, but also his ability to challenge superior forces and assert himself in apparently hopeless situations.

Eventually emotions resulting from social suffering also gave the feuding element its unusually savage consistency. The scholarly literature commonly conceptualizes the process of tribal feuding and blood revenge as rule-bound and transactional; transgression and violation of the rules are only mentioned cautiously, in the subjunctive, and emphasis is placed on rules, stability, and the maintenance of the social equilibrium as the overarching concern. Blood feud remains somewhat alien to these understandings of society that are based on law and common sense. These understandings allow little room for the (tribal) subject and agency of the individual whose motivations and actions push the boundaries and exploit the system to an extreme extent. Shelagh

11 Mundy 1995: 202. I have dealt with this issue in more analytical detail elsewhere, see Brandt 2014a: 98–105.

Weir, for example, in her (brilliant) discussion of the concept of blood feud in Rāziḥ quotes a tribesman saying that when seeking vengeance, “there would be terrible trouble if avengers entered [the territory of another tribe] without permission”¹² – and indeed in the course of the blood feud in Sufyān exactly these and other “terrible troubles” and transgressions happened all along as the feuding process dragged on and left behind a trail of blood, collateral damage, and destruction.

Marshall Sahlins, drawing on Marcel Mauss, goes beyond the discussion of the rules for vengeance and feuding and raises the question of whether blood feud causes social order or disorder by adding the aspect of passionate violence.¹³ He argues that “negative reciprocity” – the “exchange of harms” – entails an exchange of offensive actions between the distinct parties that has a tendency to escalate: offence turns into vengeance, vengeance turns into a feud, and a feud can wipe out an entire family or group.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Émile Durkheim sees blood feud as a manifestation of “passionate sociality.”¹⁵ Mujāhid’s narrative is evidence that there is also an element of emotion and passion at work as a fundamental part of the feuding process, even if scholarship on tribalism in Yemen pays less attention to the aspect of passion and almost always privileges the social and legal frameworks surrounding vengeance. It is, however, this element of passion that explains why there remains the risk of escalation and transgression of the rules. When exploring a similarly epic conflict in Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl starting in the late 1970s (and adding a generational aspect), Steven Caton observed a comparable situation involving “heedless youth pushing symbolic violence too far” and the efforts of “mature males to reign them in.”¹⁶ In the case of the Sufyān and *bayt* Ḥaydar, a consideration of the element of passionate violence enables us to understand why, carried away by grief and rage, those involved in the process in some ways overstepped the mark and violated the rules of tribal law and custom in their efforts to exact revenge on the enemy. Over time, and because of these transgressions, the revenge issue at hand earned a reputation so frightening that some of those involved were evacuated from Yemen or went mad from the pressure of persecution.

12 Weir 2007: 211.

13 Sahlins 1965; and Mauss 1990.

14 Examples of negative reciprocity and the escalation of feuding in European history are documented for Corsica (Wilson 1988), Friuli (Muir 1993), and Calabria (Brögger 1971).

15 Durkheim 1968: 301.

16 See Caton 1990; and Caton 2005 for Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl. On similar concepts in al-Mahrah, see Liebhaber 2013.

As the feuding process advanced, we are often reminded of Aeschylean fatality and the *Oresteia*. A resemblance between the Ḥaydar case and the *Oresteia* is obvious, though the latter is informed by a very different social and historical context and conceptualized as an issue of revenge in the family. Yet, the Ḥaydar case is also a domestic, almost familial affair because of the fatal role of the in-laws of the Dhū ‘Aybān*. Both cases feature cycles of ongoing retaliation, in which the theme of passionate revenge is the main motivator of the actions. The entirety of the process revolves around revenge. Yet, while in the *Oresteia* the cycle of retaliation comes to a stop near the end of *The Eumenides*, when the vengeance process is interrupted by a legal process of delivering justice, in the Ḥaydar case the feud has not, until now, been channelled into litigation. There is an element of irreconciliation that overrides the primacy attributed to mediation in tribal customs and traditions. It is the tenacity of blood feud that finds its expression in the proverbial Arab saying, “Revenge is a drop of blood that does not rot nor decay” (*al-tha’r nuqtat dam lā tata’ffan wa-lā tasūs*).¹⁷ A consideration of the impact of individual emotions and affective motivations certainly deepens our understanding of the complexity and momentum “tribal” violence can assume in a milieu beset by personal, political, ideological, and sectarian struggles.

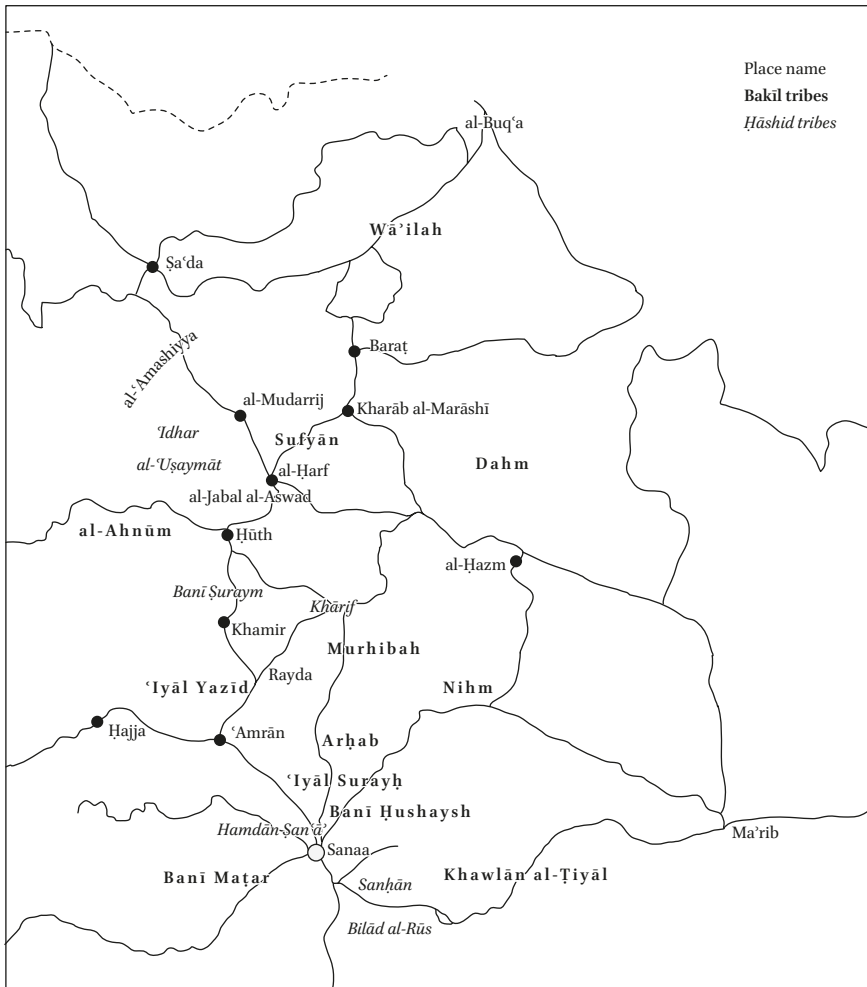
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So is Mujāhid a tribal hero or an “insolent rogue,” as President Ṣāliḥ insulted him in rage? At the beginning of this book I pointed out that the perception of Mujāhid by his contemporaries is extraordinarily ambivalent and even contradictory, and conveys images that, depending on one’s point of view, evoke either admiration or contempt. Certainly he is a fine example of Shryock’s observation that “the shaykhs may indeed embody tribalism’s ideal virtues, but they are also considered excellent in the negative qualities tribesmen are thought to share.”¹⁸ Is Mujāhid a traditionalist, his gaze irretrievably fixed on the antagonisms of a vanished era, someone who is unable to come to terms with the profound social and political transformations of the last decades? Or is he the embodiment of tribal virtues, his life illuminated by the last rays of Yemen’s moribund past and its splendid world of tribal chivalry and glory? Indeed the fiery intensity of his passions, along with his singular and

17 In this context, it is worth mentioning that Mujāhid always used the present tense when referring to the ‘aybs suffered, thus he re-enacted the blood debts that in fact took place decades or even centuries earlier.

18 Shryock 1990: 160.

incorruptible determination to challenge a regime that he considered unjust, make his life story excellent material for a novel, and perhaps nothing of his legacy will remain but the tale of his life. It goes without saying that this anthropological silhouette does not pretend to convey every detail of his life, and thus cannot provide answers to these questions. It can only approach its protagonist, leaving his enigma and ambivalence untouched.



MAP 2 Map of the north-western part of the Republic of Yemen, showing cities, roads, and main tribal divisions



FIGURE 1 One of the historical houses of the Һaydar family in Sufyān
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ҺAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 2 Sufyān's signature Mountain, Jabal Maflūq, as seen from the public highway in Sufyān
AUTHOR'S PHOTO, 2004



FIGURE 3 The public road in ‘Amrān governorate
AUTHOR'S PHOTO, 2006



FIGURE 4 Village in Sufyān
AUTHOR'S PHOTO, 2004



FIGURE 5 Aḥmad b. Qā'id Ibn
Ḥaydar, d. 1987
PHOTO COURTESY OF
THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 6 Ḥaydar b. Aḥmad Ibn
Ḥaydar, d. 1982
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE
ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 7 Ḥaydar b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar (second from left) during his military training for the NDF in Lebanon in the early 1980s. To his left and right members of other influential shaykhly lineages of ʿIyāl Surayḥ and Dahm of Bakīl active in the NDF
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 8 Ḥāmis b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar, d. 1983
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 9 Mujāhid b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥaydar in 1988, wearing the uniform of a First Lieutenant
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 10 Mujahid Haydar, 1990s
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 11 Mujāhid with Yāsir, one of his sons
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE
ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 12 Mujāhid in Syria, early 2000s
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE
ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 13 Dīwān in the Ḥaydar family’s house in Wāsiṭ al-Ḍal’a: members of the *qawm*
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY



FIGURE 14 Mujāhid in Cairo, 2018
PHOTO COURTESY OF
THE ḤAYDAR FAMILY

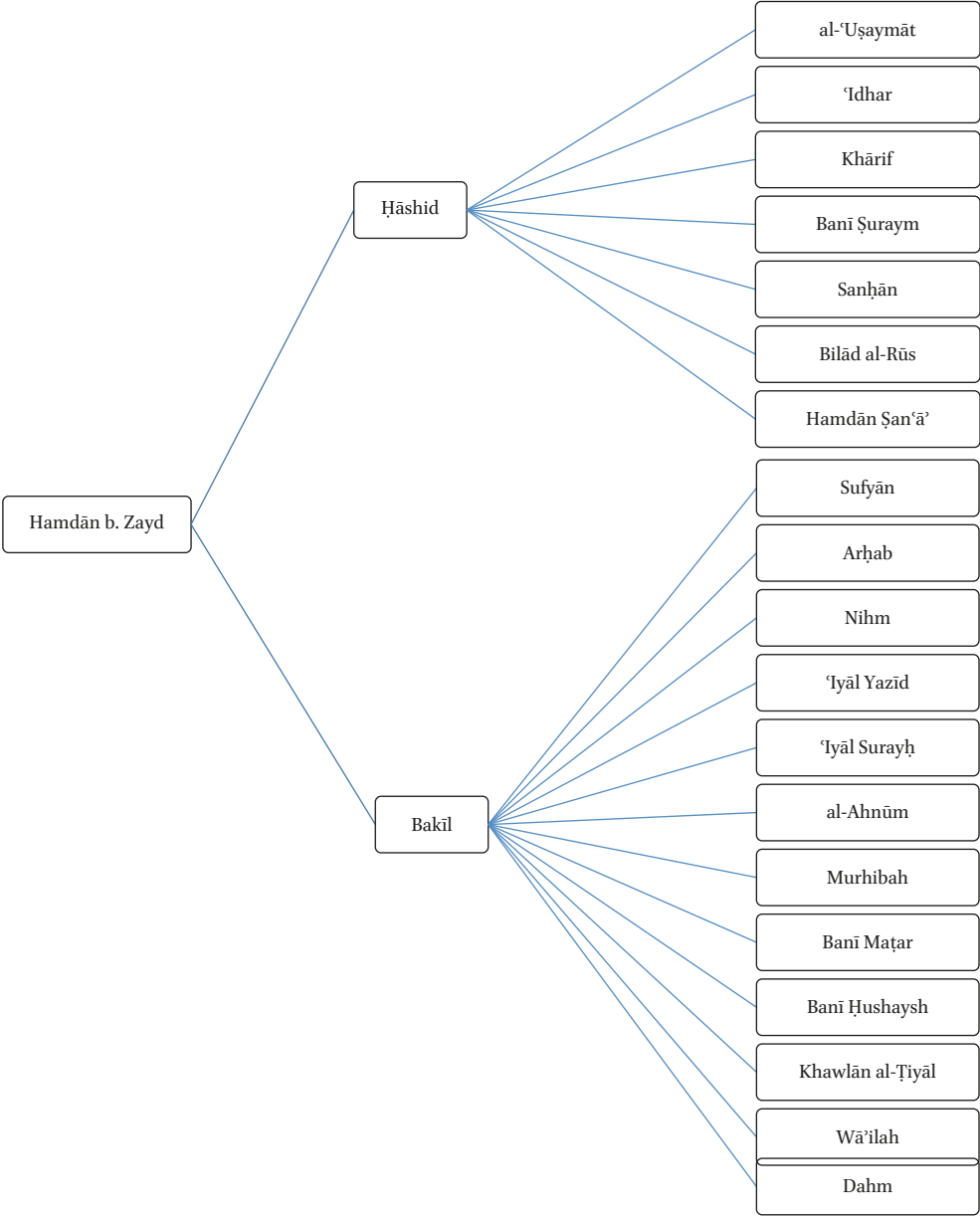


FIGURE 15 Progeny of Hamdān b. Zayd: The tribes of Ḥāshid and Bakīl (simplified)
SOURCE: BRANDT 2014A

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This book chronicles the life and times of tribal leader Mujāhid Ḥaydar, scion of a prominent local dynasty, and his agency in highland Yemen's political conflicts from the 1970s to the early 2000s. When the political elites of the Ṣāliḥ regime murder his father and his elder brothers, he is forced to exact revenge and lead his tribe through dramatic vicissitudes that culminate in the catastrophe of the Ḥūthī wars. Mujāhid's life is a story of ongoing strife, heroism, resistance, commitment to the defence of honour, loss, and exile. His biography offers nuanced and original insights into how tribal politics in Yemen influence the domain of the state and are often intertwined with it – such that neither can be comprehended independently from the other.

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